

AVIATIONsecurity *international*

The Journal of Airport & Airline Security

OCTOBER 2001 : Volume 7 Issue 5

September 11th 2001

**Suicidal Terrorists:
on a journey to paradise**

**Sky Marshals:
the last line of defence**

**Human Trafficking and Smuggling:
legal and political developments**

**Explosive Trace Detection:
the cargo challenge**

ISSN 1 352-0148 USPS 010-807



Thoughts from Ground Zero

by Philip Baum

It was early Saturday evening. I stood at the check-in for my flight to New York. "Can I have a window seat", I asked. "You can sit anywhere you like" replied the check-in agent, "there are hardly any passengers on board". I made my way through a Heathrow terminal normally buzzing with activity. It was eerily silent. At the gate, a number of passengers gathered. There was tension in the air. My stomach churned. For the first time in all my years flying, I felt uneasy about boarding an aircraft. This was the Saturday identified as the second day of infamy when additional terrorist attacks were supposedly planned...

The following morning, having safely arrived in New York, I visited Ground Zero. Despite the endless images that I had witnessed on television, the shock wave that came over me through the confrontation of reality was, I believe, a deeply defining moment in my life. Henceforth, my attitudes towards both work and life were to change. The grotesque remnants of the World Trade Center lay before me. The only sound was of trucks and cutting equipment being utilised by the rescue workers. No one spoke. The ruins still smouldered. 6000 people, eleven days after one of the worst crimes of the modern age, still lay hidden in the rubble. People who had known they were going to die. People who had called their loved ones from the towers' top floors knowing there was no escape. People who had jumped to their deaths rather than burn alive. And people aboard civilian airliners bound for California that had been flown into the heart of New York City by suicidal terrorists.

People react in different ways to such

scenes. Some are overcome with grief. Others deny the reality of the situation. I was angry, very angry... but strangely not with the perpetrators. For sure they symbolised the depth to which humans can sink, but I was more concerned with our own responsibility and our failure to prevent the atrocity. Our failure to stop an act that resulted in 6000 deaths and an estimated 11,000 children losing at least one parent.

To identify the weaknesses in our system, we need to understand the sheer brilliance of the plan. The hijacking of four aircraft on domestic routes, with full fuel loads for trans-continental flights that would create maximum damage on impact. The hijacking of four aircraft during the morning airport rush hour when screening points would be at their busiest, yet where the flights themselves carried relatively few passengers, thereby reducing the risk of passenger revolt to a minimum. The hijacking of four aircraft representing the modern day giants of the American aviation industry. The delayed impact of the second aircraft just so that the TV cameras could capture the horror to further terrify an unsuspecting world. The hijacking of four aircraft by the use of small blades and box cutters that, had they been identified, would merely have been confiscated or placed in checked luggage and would not have compromised the opportunity for the terrorists to succeed in their objectives. And who would have believed that 19 people would get up one morning and willingly go to their deaths? It was a plan that seemed perfect.

It has been generally acknowledged that the first failure lies with the intelli-

gence community. This was not the action of a lone individual or a Timothy McVeigh who may have had a couple of accomplices. This was organised terror, utilising cells positioned around the globe. Cells that should have been infiltrated, with members who should have been kept under surveillance.

One could rightly argue that intelligence is not the responsibility of the aviation community. Acting on it, on the other hand, certainly is. Time will tell how much was known ahead of time about the hijackers.

There has been much criticism of domestic security in the United States – and rightly so. Basic security principles have been set aside due to economic pressures. No positive passenger bag match on domestic flights (albeit that this was based on the outdated principle of no terrorist knowingly blowing himself up). Access to gate areas by all (making the needle in the haystack harder to find as the numbers of people accessing sterile areas was unlimited). Kerbside check-in. And, most fundamentally, the utilisation of cheap labour to operate screening points. Some starting pay figures for staff at Hancock International Airport, as reported in the Herald-American, demonstrate the obscene value set for the protection of human life.

Maintenance worker \$12.08 per hour

Bathroom custodian \$10.96 per hour

Pizza cooker \$7.34 per hour

Parking lot cashier \$6.15 per hour

Huntleigh security guard \$5.70 per hour

Furthermore, the way in which federal government has abdicated responsibility for what most would now see as a control that is part of national defence adds insult



Ground Zero; the remnants of the World Trade Center

to injury. Even after the tragedy of September 11th, I was painfully aware that when I entered the United States I was vetted by two federal agencies – INS and US Customs, yet, when I left, no federal agent examined me at all.

Whilst it is very easy to take pot-shots at America, a country that preaches security and invests heavily in research and development programmes for new technologies, yet fails to get to the root of the problem, the rest of the world can hardly afford to be complacent. The reality is that the September 11th hijackers would probably have penetrated most airport security systems in the world, so reliant have we become on the use of technology to identify would-be hijackers.

The only way of preventing such people getting on to flights is by the use of profiling skills. Not necessarily the full blown in depth questioning techniques as devel-

oped by the Israelis (which are somewhat impractical given the size of the aviation industry today, with most airports not large enough to act as holding areas for vast numbers of people arriving three or four hours before their flight departure), but by behavioural analysis, performed by intelligent, streetwise, professionally trained security agents.

“...the September 11th hijackers would probably have penetrated most airport security systems in the world...”

In the United States, once again technology has replaced the human brain and passengers are profiled by computers – quite an amazing success rate, 19 hijackers still managed to board four different aircraft on one day from three different airports!

And around the world we have tasked

check-in personnel to ask (or, even worse, who instruct passengers to read) questions about their baggage. These agents are more concerned about seat assignments and ensuring the baggage is correctly tagged than they are genuinely focusing, whilst maintaining eye contact, on the answers they are given. Furthermore, some such agents actually believe that this is part of the procedure to identify a hijacker! Cosmetic security, that is at best farcical and at worst downright irresponsible.

I am not blaming the check-in agents. Nor do I blame the security guards. I do, however, blame the system that is making them responsible without adequately equipping them with the tools to effect the task at hand.

We've lost the common sense approach to security. Suddenly knives with blades less than 4 inches are banned in the United States. The Europeans have also banned all metal cutlery, and even the crew members can't take a corkscrew on board an aircraft. It's a procedural admission that the system lacks the ability to profile people. It's a procedure designed to satisfy the demands of the general public. It's a procedure that fails to take into consideration the fact that a plane can be hijacked with one's bare hands, a belt, or a bottle. Worse still, it's a procedure designed to fail as people will continue to demonstrate that they can get small blades onto flights through X-ray machines and archway metal detectors that were designed to identify guns, grenades and larger metallic items.

Strange as it may seem, the one area in which security procedures in the United States were more stringent than in Europe

is on the aircraft itself. There are very strict rules about entry to the cockpit and there is at least a sky marshal programme in existence. We need to recognise that with all the security procedures being enforced to their maximum, we still need a last line of defence on board our aircraft.

Flight attendants are present for our safety. So too should sky marshals fly for our security. Hijacker entry to cockpits of both Xinhua Airlines and Royal Jordanian flights were prevented last year by sky marshals. And, for a more traditional example, in 1970 when four New York-bound flights were hijacked on a single day, only one failed – when sky marshals swung into action.

American pilots plea to be allowed to carry arms. Whilst they are understandably concerned about their security, I shudder at the thought of pilots waiting, gun in hand, for an intruder rather than focusing on flying. Once the cockpit door has been breached, the battle, if not the war, is lost. If any crew are to be armed, it would seem more sensible for it to be one of the flight attendants who can at least prevent access to the cockpit, yet I fear that the macho image of the pilot compared to the image of the weaker flight attendant is clouding some people's vision. In any case, I'd rather leave the weapons in the hands of those who are travelling incognito and who have been trained extensively in their use.

Back at Ground Zero, in the heart of a human tragedy that demonstrated that aviation security is far more than the protection of lives on any one flight, I was reminded of whitewash statements from the industry. I recalled the countless times that I had been told that the emphasis on hold baggage screening since Lockerbie was more important than hijack prevention as the potential loss of life would be greater. Visit Ground Zero. I recalled the excuses made for there being laxer security controls in America due to the threat being lower. Visit Ground Zero. I recalled the arguments against profiling due to it being discriminatory against certain ethnic groups, unpalatable to frequent fliers, too labour intensive and too time consuming. Visit Ground Zero.

This is no "I told you so" editorial. Within the industry we all know the limitations of the system. We all share, to a certain extent, in the guilt. No doubt questions will be raised about the actions of certain individuals, but, rather than go on a witch hunt, maybe we would be better off by asking ourselves just how professional we really are. Whilst there is no quick fix



Posters bearing pictures of those missing from the World Trade Center are affixed to walls throughout New York; a potent reminder as to the effect a failure of aviation security can have on the innocent.

solution to be had, we had better start the process of trying to be a little more proactive than reactive. We need, even now, to be finding solutions to identify the threats of tomorrow – the biological and the chemical threats. Or maybe we should just kid ourselves that they don't exist! After all the industry laughed off the possibility of suicidal terrorists taking to the skies...

As I left Ground Zero and made my way through the streets of lower Manhattan the anger subsided. One could not fail to be touched by the tremendous communal spirit that the disaster had generated. Volunteers manned soup kitchens, the public cheered the rescue workers, charity collection boxes rapidly filled. The posters of missing loved ones bedecked walls throughout the city and New Yorkers studied the images of those now dead,

almost wishing them alive.

That's now, I thought, but what about the future? How will these hijacks be remembered? The destruction of Pan Am 103 became known as Lockerbie. The multi-skyjacking in 1970 is referred to as Dawson's Field. And, the 1976 Air France hijacking goes by the name of Entebbe. Ultimately, all were named after their final resting places. Yet the hijacks of September 11th ended in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania. So it seems appropriate that if we are to view the catastrophe as an attack on civilisation as a whole rather than any single geographic location, then perhaps we had better remember it as the day on which aviation security changed forever. Indeed, the day on which the world changed forever – September 11th 2001. ☺