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# On A Screen Near You

by Philip Baum



**R**emember the days of the tacky aviation disaster movies? Well, they're about to return to a screen near you in the not too distant future...

It would seem that Hollywood has decided that a sufficient period of time has now elapsed, since the horrors of 11 September 2001, to justify the making of films where an airline hijack is the central theme. Within the next twelve months, there will be at least three such movies.

Is this of concern to us? It certainly should be. Whilst, in these pages, we generally discuss issues such as terrorism, screening, security management systems, harmonisation of procedures, technologies, audits and training, given that our every step needs also to take account of the world we live in, we cannot ignore the potential negative impact such movies may have on our industry.

Already in cinemas, and indeed a box office hit on the North American continent, is "Flightplan" from The Walt Disney stable. In brief, Kyle Pratt, played by Jodie Foster, is the engineer who designed the aircraft on which she is flying from Berlin to New York. To add some spice, her dead husband's body is in the hold. With her, on board, is her young daughter, Julia. Pratt awakes from an inflight doze only to find that Julia has disappeared. Already emotionally devastated by the unexpected death of her husband, Pratt desperately struggles to prove her sanity to the disbelieving flight crew and passengers, while facing the very real possibility that she may be losing her mind. So far, pretty unbelievable, yet of little concern to the aviation security world.

However, it emerges that one of the flight attendants aboard is involved in a terrorist plot hatched by the plane's sky

marshal. It is this twist in the story that (in the real world!) has prompted trade unions representing 80,000 of the United States' 90,000 flight attendants to encourage their membership to boycott the film.

Given all the focus on aircrew training in the post September 11th era and the efforts made by crew to reassure passengers that their flights are safe, the unions feel that Hollywood has unjustly undermined their efforts. In a statement by Patricia Friend, of the Association of Flight Attendants (AFA), she states that, "the depiction of flight attendants is an outrage. Flight attendants continue to be the first line of defence on an aircraft and put their lives on the line day after day for the safety of passengers".

To add insult to injury, the other flight attendants on the flight are, according to the union, portrayed as being "rude, unhelpful and uncaring." The Association of Professional Flight Attendants (APFA) and the Transport Workers Union Local 556 share the AFA's concern and joined it in encouraging their members to boycott the film too.

Another spokesperson for the AFA, Corey Caldwell, told the Reuters news agency that the portrayal of airline cabin crew members as evil-doers adds further insult to long-standing Hollywood stereotypes that have depicted flight attendants as sexualised bubble-heads or as harsh, humourless disciplinarians.

It is this portrayal that may well have a link to the nature of some of the disruptive passenger incidents being perpetrated in the skies. Thank you Hollywood!

"Flightplan", I guess, is unlikely to be the inflight movie (although one carrier I've flown did opt to show "Airplane" somewhat surprisingly) on your next long-haul flight...

For most of us "Flightplan" is just another thriller and the union response may be easily dismissed as being an overreaction. Yet think again, for most of us a few drinks doesn't generate a tirade of abuse...

Next year's offerings are directly related to the terrorist attacks of September 11th.

First out is likely to be "Flight 93", directed by Paul Greengrass for Universal Pictures. The film, as the title suggests, will cover the story of the one hijacked flight not to make it to its target - United Airlines flight 93 that crashed in Pennsylvania. Greengrass' intention is to produce a 90-minute film that will cover the flight in real time, from take off to impact, losing only 30 minutes of the 2-hour actual flying time in the process. Greengrass has yet to commence filming, yet reports indicate that it will be a relatively low budget movie, filmed using handheld cameras and encouraging actors to improvise their performances.

Movies have long been made about real battles. No doubt family members of those who were killed in such conflicts find the dramatisation and commercialisation of their loved ones deaths hard to stomach. How much more so in this case?

The wounds are still extremely fresh. Furthermore, nobody really knows what actually happened on board flight 93 or why it crashed where it did. The problem with a cinematic epic is that it becomes the real story. Moviegoers in their tens of thousands will flock to the cinema, drawn by allure of a "real" air disaster offering and it being the first 9/11 film, and will depart believing that they know how each of the passengers and crew reacted.

Unless Greengrass is going to make everyone a hero which, in reality, they probably were not, their memories will be

tarnished. The families are going to have to endure speculation as to which actor was playing their relative and whether or not their portrayal was accurate. Todd Beamer's "Let's Roll" command may have made him stand out from the crowd on the day. Now, I think, it's time for all those on board, hijackers aside, to remain as equals. Beyond that, we should only deal with facts.

The other 11 September movie due to hit the cinemas on 11 August next year (one month ahead of the fifth anniversary, supposedly to avoid being seen to be commercially exploiting the attacks!) is, as yet, unnamed. It will come from the Paramount stable and be directed by Oliver Stone and star Nic Cage.

The film will tell the story of the last two people pulled from the rubble of New York's World Trade Centre. Cage will play a New York Port Authority policeman, Sergeant John McLoughlin, who was trapped along with one of his fellow officers in the mangled

wreckage of one of the twin towers. The movie will focus on the two men, together with their rescuers and families, as they battle to find out what happened to their missing loved ones in the aftermath of the attacks.

Variety magazine has expressed concern that Oliver Stone will try and use the film and the cinemas as political tools (as Michael Moore did with Fahrenheit 9/11) to attack George W. Bush for his handling of the attacks and their aftermath.

From what is known of the project to date, the aviation angle of the story will be limited. However, as with the other movies now hitting our screens, we must hope that they do not increase the general public's fear of flying, nor encourage any mentally disturbed copycat to imitate the missions. For, if so, Hollywood will have further enhanced the terrorising impact of 11 September 2001...which is all part of the al Qaeda game plan.

**"Hollywood will have further enhanced the terrorising impact of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001"**

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2 Gardner Road  
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leads@controlscreening.com  
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#### In Canada:

info@tracedetection.com  
www.scintrextrace.com  
Tel: + (613) 224-1061  
Fax: + (613) 224-2603

#### In Middle East:

ME@controlscreening.com  
Tel: + 971 50 558 0689

#### In Europe:

eu@controlscreening.com  
Tel: + 33 2 38 61 97 00  
Fax: + 33 2 38 61 97 01

#### In Asia:

asia@controlscreening.com  
Tel: + 65 6844-2594  
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