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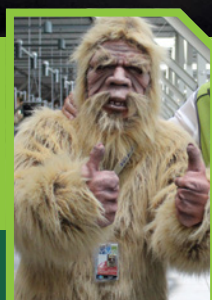# Health Hazards at the Checkpoint:
a germaphobe's worst nightmare

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PROACTIVITY:

ADDRESSING THE EVER-LENGTHENING 'TO-DO' LIST

by Philip Baum

The challenges we face in keeping our airports and aircraft safe and secure are constantly evolving. In the early days of aviation, the most frequently occurring criminal act was the theft of aircraft, often by joyriders or thrill seekers. Since then we have gone through different eras in which aircraft were commandeered to drop political propaganda leaflets, sabotaged for either insurance gain or as a means to murder an individual on board, skyjacked to escape political regimes, hijacked or bombed to ensure worldwide media coverage of the plight of a particular ethnic group, or targeted by suicidal individuals with warped religious ideologies devoid of any clear political message. There have been landmark dates or events – Dawson's Field, Entebbe, Lockerbie, 9/11, Brussels – which have become enshrined in every aviation security course. So too have the unsuccessful attacks – the shoe bomber, the underpants bomber, the printer toner plot, the liquid explosive plot. The common thread of the events we choose to remember has always been – terrorist acts.

Yet in between these 'highlights' are the multitude of other criminal acts, many of which have had equally catastrophic consequences, which, after a few days or weeks, we tend to quickly consign to history or, worse still, dismiss as not being an aviation security issue. Whilst there have been far more aircraft lost as a result of suicidal pilots than suicidal passengers, we pigeonhole the issue as being a safety-related problem. For many in the industry, the Germanwings disaster was the first example they had heard of pilot-assisted suicide – examples from Silkair, Royal Air Maroc and LAM Mozambican Airlines never featuring in any training course. And how quickly we have already forgotten Andreas Lubitz anyway.

Stowaways, hitching rides in the landing gears of aircraft, are just as illustrative of porous airport security as any hijacker managing to infiltrate a weapon through a checkpoint, yet we view these incidents as if we are more concerned for the fact that the stowaway might – and probably will – die, than we do to use the incidents to demand more robust perimeter intrusion detection capabilities.

It is possible that the industry fails to respond because the media does not highlight the security implications. Whilst they will ask how it can possibly be that somebody can get through a security checkpoint with a weapon, when a body falls from an aircraft as it commences its' final approach, the focus will be on what happens to the human body when exposed to the elements at altitude, the process of the poikilothermic reaction, survival rates and the possibility of a stowaway being conscious as they fall. In other words, headline grabbers. But are we, in the aviation security industry, not better than that? Whilst I feel sorry for John Baldock, the man who was sunbathing in a garden in south London when a body plummeted 3,500 feet from a Kenya Airways aircraft and landed just beside him, the real story is how the stowaway managed to get on board. And, given that this is the fourth such incident that I am aware of this year, surely the international community should be chomping at the bit to draft new standards to address access control failings. Or do we wait until the item that makes it into the landing gear is an IED rather than a desperate human being?

There is a huge appetite to address cyber vulnerabilities and a will to deploy countermeasures which will respond to the ever-increasing number of drone-related incidents. This is all very welcome. Aside from the terrorist threat, there are certainly economic reasons why these areas must be addressed. This July, British Airways was fined a staggering £183.39 million for allowing, through negligence, hackers to obtain personal data, including payment card details, of around half a million of its customers. And airports from Singapore to London Gatwick and Dubai to Madrid will be able to attest to the impact on airport operations of UAVs illegally entering restricted airspace, let alone, as we are witnessing in Saudi Arabia on an alarmingly regular basis, the potential for weaponised drones to target our airports.

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The majority of the day-to-day security challenges we face can be addressed through the use of technology. There are, however, notable exceptions.

The escalating number of incidences involving unruly passengers demands a far more robust policy. The airline industry itself is focussing on holding the unruly passenger to account – and so they should be – but they cannot abdicate themselves of their own responsibility to ensure, where possible, that passengers under the influence of excess alcohol are denied boarding. The Montreal Protocol makes no reference to fines that can be levied on carriers for their own dereliction of duty. If an airline can be fined for transporting an inadmissible passenger (who does not have correct travel documentation), why can it not also be fined for permitting loutish behaviour on board?

It might be hard to identify a lone individual who has drunk to excess, but in recent weeks there have been a disturbing number of reports in which large groups of people are alleged to have behaved in completely unacceptable manner on board commercial aircraft, with the low-cost carriers clearly having to clean up their acts. In May, a group of men were filmed drinking beer through a funnel on an easyJet flight from London Stansted to Alicante, allegedly assisted by a flight attendant, and, on a Ryanair flight from Berlin to Majorca, a group of men allegedly performed Nazi salutes and sang racist songs; they even wore clothing with extremist political slogans and were reported for their anti-social activity during the boarding process. In July,
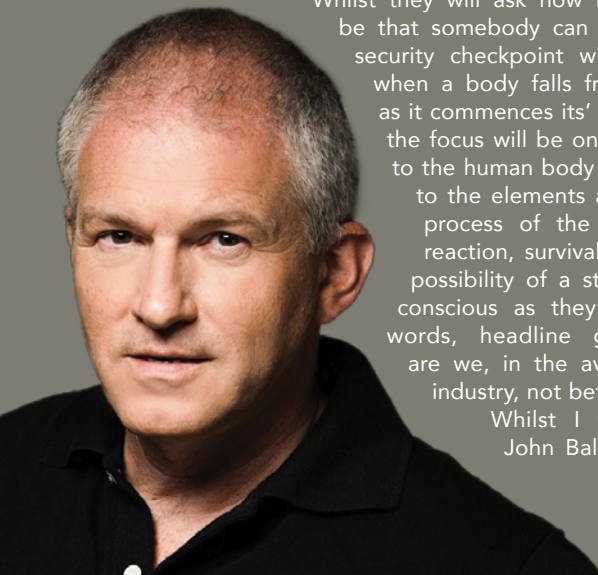
mob-like behaviour was witnessed on a Ryanair flight from Manchester to Zadar, Croatia, whilst, on yet another Ryanair flight, a stag party en route to Ibiza, carrying their own alcohol, terrified other passengers. Again, their clothing indicated trouble; they were wearing obscene T-shirts.

I see no reason, as some would like, to ban the sale of alcohol at airports. That penalises the masses for the failings of the few. But, like driving a car, there could be a clearly defined point at which a person is determined to be 'over the limit', and, if so, must be denied boarding. Breathalyser test kits at the gate? Why not? It's all about responsible consumption levels and the only people who will really object are those who do drink to excess and those who are more concerned about the potential loss of revenue from alcohol sales than they are for aircraft safety.

The other area where policy, rather than technology, comes to the fore is in response to the seemingly increasing number of protests being staged at airports. Many of the objectives of the groups involved may be laudable – the climate change group, Extinction Rebellion, being a case in point. But airports are part of the national infrastructure and, in many states, the only gateway to the rest of the world. Consequently, the authorities have a duty to ensure that operations continue unimpeded and there comes a point where a supposedly peaceful protest warrants a more aggressive response. We must all become more environmentally aware, and it may well be the most pressing issue of our time, but that does not warrant action which prevents trade, denies people access to medical care, separates families at times of need and increases the stress levels of passengers, many of whom, are already suffering a battery of anxiety and/or stress-related disorders.

One may be sympathetic to the reasons why protesters felt compelled to occupy Hong Kong International Airport, but many of their number were far from 'peaceful' as described by

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the international press and it was incumbent upon the security agencies to maintain control of the territory's only aerial gateway. It cannot be acceptable for any group to take action which completely grounds flights for a prolonged period of time. Airports are usually very tolerant of small-scale protests, and often facilitate them when groups coordinate responsibly, but there is a disturbing trend towards more aggressive, large-scale actions which could have huge security implications in the years ahead.

Manufacturers and academics have developed highly sophisticated technologies that are capable of identifying many of the quantities of explosives that might have been used to target aircraft in the past. They are also capable of developing viable solutions to address many of our vulnerabilities. But they need to know what we need and it is incumbent upon the international community to set out a vision for the types of solutions we would like to see in place.

Just to take one of the aforementioned challenges – stowaways – as an example; in the age of the miniaturised cameras, CCTV surveillance of landing gears must be feasible at a very low cost? So too the use of heat-sensors. But if we also want to guard against the infiltration of IEDs onto aircraft, then we must also consider virtual fences which can surround an aircraft when it is at the gate or even poised at the end of the runway ready for take-off. Proactive security measures, that do not negatively impact passenger facilitation and which, nowadays, can be delivered at a very reasonable price. ◾