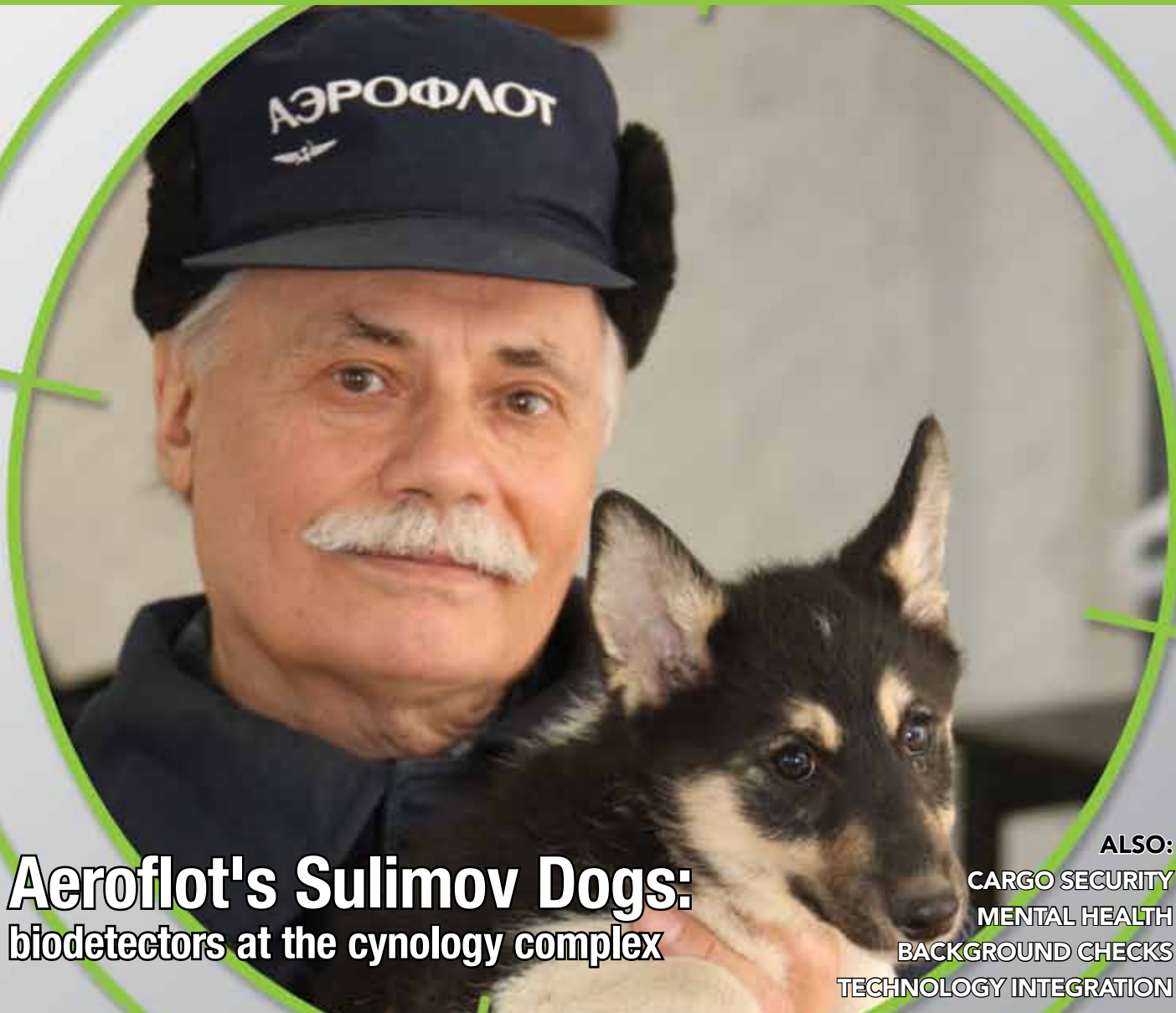


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DECEMBER 2010 VOLUME 16 ISSUE 6



We Wish You A Merry Checkpoint: and secure cargo new year

by Philip Baum

The media is awash with tales of passenger woe at security checkpoints. We've had a mother who had expressed breast milk for her baby detained, a cancer patient covered in urine when a screener displaced his urostomy bag, a wheelchair passenger sitting in her underwear and many an upset crewmember feeling that the invasive security procedures are overkill. In the United States, the pat-down debate is alive and kicking with passengers claiming to have been groped, molested or abused by overzealous agents. Many of the stories are, quite simply, ridiculous and demonstrate that aviation security checkpoints are a little like Santa Claus...something we love to believe in but which we know is a myth.

It was hardly surprising that al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) opted to target cargo flights this October. Long regarded as one of Achilles' two vulnerable heels – the other being the threat from employees within the industry – the cargo security system is known to be deficient and to rely on superficial inspections and vast quantities of paperwork with various entities attesting to the fact that consignments have been subject to appropriate security controls.

On 29th October disaster was averted thanks to Saudi Arabian intelligence, having been tipped off by an AQAP operative, notifying their American colleagues that parcels had been sent on FedEx and UPS flights to Chicago from Yemen. The packages were being sent to addresses that were actually synagogues – the Or Chadash, which is a lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual Jewish congregation, and to an inactive orthodox community. It would appear

that the plotters had used an out-of-date directory as neither address currently housed Jewish prayer halls, but it would also seem that the packages were never supposed to reach their destinations. In fact, although the addresses were of synagogues, the addressees were enemies of Islam. One was Diego Deza, the Grand Inquisitor during the Spanish Inquisition, who is said to have used sadistic interrogation methods on Muslim and Jewish converts to Christianity who he suspected were still

“...why is a shipper in Yemen sending Hewlett Packard P2055 desktop laser printers anywhere in the United States...”

practicing their original faith. The other was Reynald Krak, otherwise known as Renaud de Châtillon, who was a French knight of the Second Crusade who was particularly cruel to Muslims and who was eventually executed by Saladin.

It is striking the degree of thought that went into the planning of the cargo attack, even the placement of Dickens' novel 'Great Expectations' within one of the consignments indicated AQAP's degree of confidence in its plot; thought that went way beyond the construction of the bombs and their method of despatch. This was a plot, as shown by AQAP's subsequent publication, INSPIRE, that was intelligent, sophisticated and industrial in its nature.

Perhaps most frightening of all was the fact that, at East Midlands Airport (the UK's second largest airport for freight), even though the authorities had been given specific information about a small package alleged to contain an improvised explosive device, the consignment was determined to be "safe". It was only hours later, following information the British authorities received from Dubai, where the Emirati's had identified the concealment method, that the bomb was found. One has to wonder what hope the aviation security system has of identifying a bomb in its general screening of passengers, their baggage and cargo when an actual bomb, with 400g of PETN as its main charge, couldn't be identified by a specialist unit that had been advised there was a likelihood that the box they were examining did contain a bomb!

There was much speculation as to why the packages hadn't been determined to be suspect given that not many shippers in Yemen tend to send packages to American synagogues. However, the receiving clerk in Sana'a would not have known that the addresses were of (former) synagogues. What the clerk should have thought was "why is a shipper in Yemen sending Hewlett Packard P2055 desktop laser printers anywhere in the United States", as the cost of shipping them would outweigh the cost of the items being sent. And it is that mindset that we have to instil into our security system. Perhaps the clerk relied upon the fact that both packages were X-rayed prior to transportation?

The incident has resulted in the general public becoming aware that a huge quantity of cargo is

shipped on passenger jets as well as cargo-only aircraft. Understandably, passengers may question why they have to jump through hoops to get onto an aircraft that may well be carrying unscreened air cargo. Practically speaking, we have a challenge. We know that, whilst the X-ray of suitcases and carry-on has certain limitations, the X-ray of cargo consignments has even less value. It may be a suitable technology for screening flowers, but not for machine parts or frozen fish. Interpol acknowledged as much in its public circular press release of 6 November in which it stated, "The explosive material in these devices was generally not detectable using standard X-ray equipment, however there are available detection means such as airport 'puffer' machines, presumptive swabbing tests, and bomb-sniffing dogs."

The Christmas period is always one of concern for the aviation community. The Rome and Vienna attacks by the Abu Nidal Organisation were on 27 December 1985, Lockerbie on 21 December 1988, Air France hijack in Algiers on 24 December 1994, Indian Airlines hijack to Qandahar on 24 December 1999, Richard Reid's attempt on 22 December 2001 and, of course, last year Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab tried to destroy a Northwest airliner on Christmas Day itself with his explosive underpants. This year as we enter the festive period, the realities of 21st Century terrorism are evident on our television screens. We are being confronted with images of a father of three children, living in Luton (just north of London), bidding his family farewell and blowing himself up in Stockholm, the capital city of a country which had granted him refuge.

The news is not all doom and gloom. There are some fresh initiatives that are finally crystallising. At this year's AVSEC World, hosted by IATA in Frankfurt only days after the cargo plot, there was considerable discussion about the "Checkpoint of the Future". The industry is looking to start trying to identify people with bad intent rather than just searching for prohibited items. And, even more refreshingly, the concept is being endorsed by the International Civil Aviation Organisation.

The Checkpoint of the Future is designed so that travellers will be directed down one of three lanes, depending on how much we know about the passenger in advance of their travel and what their behaviour is like on the day itself. One lane will be for registered "known travellers" where checks would be light, one where checks would be at "normal security" level, and the third would be an "enhanced security" lane. Different technologies will be deployed in each lane, making the system less predictable.

"The current system of putting everyone through the same procedure -- taking off shoes, pulling out laptops -- is an incredible mess. It is causing longer and longer delays," said IATA Director-General Giovanni Bisignani in a recent press briefing. The aim is to eliminate the need for the routine scanning and searches of all carry-on luggage.

Although IATA is not saying it yet, the Checkpoint of the Future can potentially be applied to air cargo as well as to passenger screening operations.

Whether or not it becomes a reality depends on the common sense of governments around the world to acknowledge the necessity for such a dramatic change that will involve stripping away elements of the current system. That means that brave decisions will have to be taken by courageous leaders.

If only a few States adopt the Checkpoint of the Future concept, it could create more problems than it solves and would almost certainly sound the death knell for One Stop Security. So we need universal buy-in.

As much as I am thrilled by these long overdue pronouncements, we must be cautious as to who we classify as "known travellers". When we say we "know" somebody, do we really "know" them or have we just ticked some boxes? Mohammed Atta, for example, was a frequent flier. So, as the future checkpoint concept is developed over the next few years, we must ensure that the behavioural analysis aspect of the process is emphasised rather than seen to be an add-on measure.

For now, the queues will persist. It's not going to change overnight. We will have frustrated passengers venting. We will have security screeners amazing us with their ability to apply rules perfectly whilst failing to apply common sense. That demands tolerance -- of officials for upset passengers, of travellers for security staff who are simply doing their job and even for regulators who have to adapt a system in the knowledge that we could face another attack that will switch our focus to another area of the system.

In the meantime, I wish you all a very merry checkpoint and a secure cargo new year! ■

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