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LAX Target: by insiders and outsiders

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GERARDO I. HERNANDEZ:

in memoriam

by Philip Baum

Sadly for Los Angeles World Airports, over the past few months the eyes of the aviation security world have focussed on actual attacks perpetrated at LAX. Most airports have in place a sophisticated security infrastructure designed for the 'never never'; after all, even in the US, which clearly considers itself to be a potential target for terrorist activity, the chances of any individual being on duty when an attack takes place is minimal.

There are an abundance of security challenges being posed to airport authorities around the world. Airports are becoming centres for civil action as demonstrators take to runways in order to make their point; in October, employees of a food processing plant in Brest, France, lay down on the runway in protest at job reductions at a local abattoir, whilst in November Tuareg demonstrators occupied a runway in Kidal, Mali, in order to prevent the Malian Prime Minister from visiting the town. They are also places at which serious organised criminal acts, where the aviation industry is not the target *per se*, occur; in November, Vyacheslav Zapryagayev was shot at Sheremetyevo Airport in Moscow and the thieves escaped with a bag containing \$1.6 million which Zapryagayev was, for unreported reasons, carrying.

Airport security departments have to deal with minor criminal acts, such as the woman who decided to try and swing from the Kinetic Rain sculpture at Singapore's Changi Airport in November or the two British women who decided to strip off at a Manchester Airport security checkpoint last December. And, airlines and airports alike have to deal with their daily peppering of unruly passengers, whilst the other security agencies intercept smugglers, inadmissible passengers and vagrants. But terrorist and other serious incidents, where the airport itself and/or its users are the targets, are, thankfully, a rarity.

One must, therefore, feel sorry for the LAX authorities who, within the space of three weeks, had to respond to, and manage, two serious attacks. On 13th and 14th October, a series of dry ice explosions took place at LAX terminals and, on 1st November, Paul Ciancia allegedly murdered TSA officer Gerardo I. Hernandez, and injured six others, at a security checkpoint.

Some may be quick to point out that the perpetrators were, in fact, probably merely psychologically disturbed individuals rather than lone wolf terrorists. Others will recognise that an armed gunman walking into a crowded passenger terminal with an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle and effecting the targeted killing of a TSA officer is equally serious and, granted the copycat nature of persons with such a mind-set, arguably more vexing. And if it is proven that the perpetrators of the dry ice attacks were Servisair employees, one must question the effectiveness of not only pre-employment screening, but also post-employment monitoring. The insider threat, whilst not in the form of terrorist activity, is crystal clear.

The debate can continue to rage as to whether TSA officers should carry weapons. I, for one, see zero benefit. The discussion can labour on as to whether behavioural detection officers, such as Hernandez himself, should be deployed around airport terminals to increase the chances of our intercepting those with criminal intent. I, for one, find it abhorrent that we do not already embrace such tactics. But, what

we cannot allow is for the aviation security infrastructure to continue to focus solely on counter-terrorism.

I use this lead editorial as a call to the industry to refocus. Instead of regulators concentrating all their efforts on addressing the 'needle in the haystack', perhaps they would be better off if they took the other threats equally seriously? Staff motivation would increase dramatically as security officers would realise that they really can make a difference...and not only in London Heathrow and New York JFK, but also in Shreveport, Louisiana, Xi'an, China and La Paz, Bolivia, examples of places where airport security operatives might understandably feel that, whilst terrorists may attack our Achilles Heel, they are far removed from the global war on terror.

Neighbourhood policing is a good example of risk management. I live in a suburb of London, a city where the terrorist threat is ever-prevalent, but where, at a local level, police focus on the prevention of, and response

"...an armed gunman walking into a crowded passenger terminal with an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle and effecting the targeted killing of a TSA officer..."

to, acts of burglary, assault and road traffic incidents. Local officers may (or may not!) be trained in CT-response, but their daily priority is to manage routine occurrences and, if you were even to suggest that they concentrate on identifying potential Islamic fundamentalists, both they, and the neighbourhood as a whole, would rightly be up in arms.

Gerardo I. Hernandez was the first TSA officer in the agency's 12-year history to be killed in the line of duty, and two of his colleagues almost suffered a similar fate. When Hernandez arrived in the US, aged 15, from his native El Salvador, Hernandez embraced all that was good about living the American dream. Part of that was becoming a citizen in the leader of the free world and, eventually, taking up employment in a position to safeguard those associated values. I fear we have been taken hostage by the terrorist threat, to such an extent that we have become blinkered by it and, as a result, incapable of effective responses to other challenges. Hernandez's death is a tragedy for his family and friends but, for the sake of his memory, may it also be a beacon for change. A change whereby all those engaged in aviation security feel that the likes of Paul Anthony Ciancia, the alleged LAX gunman, should be our prime concern.

The LAX attacks in both October and November were not failures of the airport's security system, but they were indicative of the issues we simply must address. ■

