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NOT ONLY KEEPING UP APPEARANCES:

thanks to Bin Thani, Boisselle and Arenas

by Philip Baum

It's all too easy to criticise and there is no doubt that the mass media seem to be able to find headline grabbing news stories relating to aviation security in general, and the passenger screening process in particular, on an almost daily basis. Intrusive pat down searches, especially of children and celebrities (including Miss USA – see Air Watch), body scanning devices that subject one to additional doses of radiation and provide security guards with pictures of us naked, expressed breast milk tasting sessions and have-a-go journalists managing to infiltrate “something that could have been a bomb” into an airport’s sterile zones without being caught! It’s a wonder anybody wants to fly...

I must admit that I found the latest anti-TSA YouTube clip, entitled the TSA Pokey Pokey (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hs5_jB46xQE), highly amusing, but I would admit that the constant demonising and incessant denigration of our front line staff, together with the exaggeration and twisted sensationalism associated with technology reviews, does little to foster a motivated workforce tasked to enact regulatory requirements.

It is generally accepted that deterrence is one of the key objectives of the airport screening process and, with that in mind, creating a professional image at the checkpoint is of fundamental importance. The illusion of security is almost as important as the reality. I am reminded of the BBC sitcom “Keeping Up Appearances”, in which the protagonist, Hyacinth Bucket, constantly aims to portray herself as an upper class snob rather than the lower middle class housewife she really is (even to the point of pronouncing her own surname as ‘bouquet’); so, whilst I have often described the checkpoint as pure theatre, there are times when we need to overlook our failings and emphasise the good using some of Hyacinth’s self confidence!

Aviation security is no comedy act and there are many real heroes who go about their duty in an exemplary manner and who rarely receive public acclaim. Over the years, I have applauded the professional appearance and behaviour of screening personnel in certain Asia Pacific and Middle Eastern countries and whether it is due to cultural norms or a stricter disciplinary regime in which they operate, the military precision of checkpoints at Hong Kong International Airport or Singapore Changi inspire far greater confidence than their American counterparts. That is particularly impressive when the threat is perceived as being lower there than elsewhere around the globe. Then again, there is clear evidence from that part of the world of the desire to professionalise the aviation security industry.

At last month’s International AVSEC Conference in Hong Kong, a biennial awards ceremony took place in which individuals were recognised for the good work that they do – the unsung heroes of our industry whose names are unfamiliar on the international stage but who turn up to work each day, do their duty and think outside the box. They are the good news story and all credit to Edith Cowan University for sponsoring the awards in conjunction with Capital Airport Aviation Security Company of Beijing, AVSECO, Emirates and Certis Cisco of Singapore.

Two of the award categories focussed on operational personnel. In the category of “Outstanding Individual in Aviation Security (Senior Official)”, the winner was Brig. Ahmed Bin Thani, the General Manager of Airport Security with Dubai International Airports.

It was Bin Thani’s intervention that resulted in the identification of one of the improvised explosive devices sent as a courier shipment from Yemen, via Dubai, in October 2010. His immediate and astute action averted what could have been a catastrophic incident of global

significance. Further to this, the detection led to the discovery of the overall terrorist plot and the identification of a similar device in the UK.

Whilst the award was given against the backdrop of his role in preventing the cargo bomb plot being realised, it was also noted that on a day-to-day basis Bin Thani has actively strived to improve aviation security within the Gulf region and, in particular in Dubai, being the fourth busiest airport in the world. He is also credited with the establishment of an ICAO certified AVSEC Training Centre in Dubai.

In the category of “Outstanding individual in Aviation Security (Front-line Staff)”, the winner was Sergeant Anthony Boisselle of Los Angeles World Airports Police Department. Boisselle has obviously impressed not only his employers but those agencies that have had to interact with him, all of whom have attested to his passion for excelling in aviation security, often using his own time and resources to further his own professional development.

Sergeant Boisselle is considered a subject matter expert in the area of airport regulations and Transportation Security Administration Security Directives. He is a certified Airport Security Coordinator, Airport Certified Employee in Security through the American Association of Airport Executives and has been a recipient of the LAWA Airport Police Officer of the Year Award. Practically, he designed and implemented the security system for the first Airbus A380 landing at LAX and was a member of the design team for the access control and CCTV project at the airport.

In this category, the awards panel also wished to note the achievements of Alessandra Johanna Arenas, an AVSEC training specialist with the Office for Transportation Security at the Philippine’s Department of Transportation and Communication.

Notably nominated by both regulators from different countries around the globe and by airport authorities and security agencies within the Philippines, Arenas has developed courseware and has been responsible for teaching these courses to over 600 screeners in 35 principal and nine international airports across the country. As AVSEC National Auditor she has conducted quality control activities, audits inspections, tests and surveys of these airports.

Whilst this editorial aims to focus on the not-so-well-known, it would be churlish to mention these award recipients without noting the other winners. Beijing Capital International Airport Public Security Sub-bureau won in the category of “Outstanding Organisation in Aviation Security”, Silva Kandiah in the category of “Lifetime Award for Services to Aviation Security” and Geoffrey Askew in the category of “Contribution to the Global Aviation Security Community.”

At conference after conference we hear the call for us to focus on human factors. Recognising the achievements of those who excel is part of this process and is one step along the road to achieving a dedicated, professional workforce that not only fosters respect from the media and the general public but also ensures our adversaries know we are an industry of substance and are not only keeping up appearances. ■

