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Security training

Hijack response and the flight attendant

Hijackings and onboard threats to passengers and crew are not diminishing. After all the electronic checking devices, the best defence is having crew members appropriately trained, says Philip Baum.

The first priority of any crew member is the safety and security of their passengers and colleagues. Safety training is one area in which airlines have invested considerable sums to ensure that they are able to respond to an emergency should the need arise. Today, simulators can provide a realistic scenario to which trainees can respond, from a cabin fire through to a ditching at sea. Yet investment in security training has fallen behind. Perhaps, with the apparent demise of the revolutionary groups that terrorised air travellers in the 1970s and 1980s carriers feel the threat is non-existent. But hijackings do occur; it's only the causes that have changed.

The threat

Sadly, many crew members still believe that a hijacker is likely to be a Middle Eastern male, aged in his mid-20s, with three days beard growth, wearing dark glasses and a black leather jacket. Maybe, but only in a Hollywood fantasy world. Today's hijackers are predominantly asylum seekers; people desperate to move to perceived pastures greener and who would rather sit in jail in their 'Garden of Eden' than live as free people in poverty.

I do not wish to imply that terrorism has ceased. On 12 April 1999, 46 people were taken captive in Columbia following a hijacking, most of whom, at the

time of writing, have yet to be released. And, albeit not airline related, Londoners who believed that peace deals relating to Northern Ireland would end bombing campaigns have had a rude awakening to the reality that individual extremists can pose as much of a threat as a highly sophisticated terrorist organisation. Recent nail bomb attacks against minority communities in London are simply one of the *modus operandi*; the perpetrators may choose hijacking in the future.

Hijack exercises

While some carriers have taken steps to improve their hijack training for cabin crew, most tend to stick to the 'let's-play-a-video' syndrome, and it's usually only the instructors that ever get to take part in hijack exercises.

Exercises should be part of every carriers' training programme, yet many fail to achieve their goal. This can either be as a result of the scenario being designed to benefit SWAT and negotiating teams rather than crew, or due to insufficient time that prevents the trainees from experiencing the different stages of a hijack.

Exercises do need to be supplemented by theory, yet there is considerable benefit in running the theoretical class after the hijack exercise. Delegates can then be asked to recall their mem-

ories. Having not discussed the subject in class earlier, those playing the roles of the passengers will be able to do so more realistically and those playing the roles of the crew members will rely on their instincts rather than training. A second, abbreviated, exercise following the class discussion could then be utilised as a demonstration of some of the techniques that should be employed if a crew does have to deal with a hijacker.

Hijack stages

Crew members must be able to distinguish between the three stages of a hijack, in order that they know when a proactive approach in dealing with a hijacker might be appropriate:

- Intimidation Phase — where the hijacker(s) seek(s) to establish control,
- Custodial Phase — where the hijacker(s) feel(s) in control and starts to negotiate, and
- Resolution Phase — where the hijack concludes either by negotiation or assault.

The first and last stages of a hijack are reasonably simple to enact in an exercise as they can be accomplished in a fairly short period of time. The Custodial Phase, however, causes problems as in reality it will be drawn out of quite a number of hours, maybe even days or weeks.

The Intimidation Phase is violent, aggressive and abusive,



although we must stress that an asylum seeker may be less vindictive and rather more nervous than a terrorist. For the trainees, as in reality, there is little chance of boredom setting in and providing the hijackers are well orchestrated it is genuinely possible to create fear and even frozen fear or action paralysis. Similarly the Resolution Phase can be recreated without much difficulty, however the situation is to conclude. Our natural reactions to these stages are nigh on impossible to predict.

The characteristics of the Custodial Phase, when the hijacker feels that he or she is now in control of the situation and the hostages are symbols of the cause or bargaining chips, are those of boredom, despair, communal spirit and, of course, the three syndromes. All of these are dependant upon time and time is what we lack in a training situation. The first three can be presented to trainees in longer exercises where

participants are deprived of food, drink, sleep, stimuli, and air conditioning. However much it might seem at the planning stage a waste of time, I would suggest that the longer the exercise the more realistic it becomes providing it is professionally presented.

London, Stockholm & John Wayne syndromes

These syndromes can only really be taught in theory.

- The famous Stockholm Syndrome is: "An unconscious natural survival technique whereby hostage and hostage-taker establish a degree of empathy with each other as a result of positive contact of a period of time." In other words, where the crew member develops an affinity with the hijacker. This affinity could be used to the flight attendant's advantage, yet it also poses a threat when the same person may become overly concerned over the hijacker's well-being.

- London Syndrome, also known as "Suicide by Terrorist", is: "An unconscious technique employed by a hostage that over a period of time results in the hostage-taker resenting the captive." Here, the crew member fails to play the role of the good hostage and becomes argumentative. This can be perceived as threatening behaviour to the hijacker who may, in extreme circumstances, wish to eliminate the threat.

- Finally, the John Wayne Syndrome involves: "The feeling of helplessness often felt by predominantly male hostages in a crisis situation when they wish they could be the hero but are actually impotent to respond and depression results." For crew members, either male or female, they are likely to feel as if they have failed in some way should a hijack occur. Many will have had dreams of how they would save the day, yet when faced with the reality of a hijacking, they feel worthless.

It could be anyone – the belief that a hijacker is likely to be a Middle Eastern male, aged in his mid-20s, with three days beard growth, wearing dark glasses and a black leather jacket is only true in Hollywood, says Philip Baum. (Photo: Ingo Wagner/Lufthansa)



Security training

All these syndromes can all only really be experienced when an individual is faced with a high stress situation over an extended period of time, 'time' that no airline can afford to allocate to security training and 'fear' that I defy any provider of hijack training exercises to generate.

The psychological problems of captivity, from anxiety in its mildest form through to severe psychiatric symptoms including auditory and visual hallucination, also cannot be presented in the form of exercises.

It is vital, however, that all crew members should be aware as to the reactions that they, their colleagues or the passengers might have to stress over an extended period of time, and then be able to promulgate methods of coping with such stress.

Prevention is better than cure

Security training needs to go beyond this. Cabin crew courses tend to concentrate, almost exclusively, on the basic rules of hijack management and possibly an exercise on least risk bomb locations. We do, however, need to ensure that crew members are part of the security web that protects our carriers.

Most flight attendants consider security checks to be the sole responsibility of the airport screeners. If one looks back at case histories of hijackings there has often been one individual, such as a crew member or airline gate agent, who has come forward after the event and said that they thought that somebody was acting strangely but did not act on their instincts as it was not part of their job function.

The closer a hijacker gets to performing the act of aerial piracy the more likely the chance of their displaying signs of nervousness; the flight attendant in this respect has an advantage over the X-ray operator, providing that they are given some guidance (or training) as to what signs could indicate that a passenger may be about to perform an illegal act rather than simply be afraid of flying.

It must be remembered that a significant number of hijacks are



Right: On the front line –there has often been an individual, such as an airline check-in or gate agent or a crew member, who has come forward after an event and said that they thought that somebody was acting strangely but did not act on their instincts, believing it not to be part of their job function. (Photo courtesy British Midland)

performed without the use of real weapons or explosives, consequently there is nothing for the screener to detect and the passenger remains a threat. Also there remains the possibility that weapons may be left for an embarking passenger and that, once again, when the passenger passed through the checkpoint there was nothing to detect. Remember, the majority of hijackings occur on domestic flights where pre-flight screening is often very limited, if carried out at all.

Whilst I am not advocating that security controls become a key function of flight attendants I do believe that they should be aware of the behavioural signs that could indicate a possible attack and be conscious of the ways that a passenger might still be a threat to the flight despite their having been screened

The challenges ahead

The commercial airline industry has a number of challenges ahead to bring security training in line with safety training. We must endeavour to

- make our crews believe the threat is real and to treat security with the same respect it affords safety issues.
- provide crews with the tools and knowledge that will best enable them to handle an in-flight hijacking. To do this exercises and discussion should become an intrinsic part of the training programme.
- ensure that our crews understand that they are very much part of the security web.

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