

# A Personal View

Expressed by Philip Baum

The editor does not normally write this column, but the industry does not normally experience two significant attacks against civil aviation within a week. No sooner had the media frenzy surrounding the devastating attacks in Brussels started to diminish, we were being informed that an EgyptAir flight had been hijacked by a man wearing a suicide vest. Cue broadcast media jostling to lure analysts onto their sets and into their recording studios. And, for the print and online media, aviation security was once again front-page news.

For a few hours, one sensed that many journalists were keen to stoke the fire and use the EgyptAir incident as justification for creating the very climate of fear that terrorist groups strive for. "Doesn't this incident demonstrate that aviation can't be protected?", or "Egypt obviously hasn't patched up its security yet, has it?" Fear is bankable. And then the responses (and I admit I contributed), where analysts second guessed the decision-making capability of the crew ("They should have known that the vest was not a real bomb") in the absence of any facts, or implied the training the crew had been given would equip them for the task ("They will have experienced situations like this in the classroom"), when we know that very few aircrew have been through a hijack exercise that in any way resembles reality. The problem is that, in the absence of hard evidence, consultants and journalists have to pontificate.

One week on, the 'genuine horror' experienced on board – significant enough for the crew to believe that Seif al-Din Mohamed Mostafa was actually prepared to die by detonating the suicide vest he had shown them he was wearing – was converted into more of a 'rocky horror' farce by the media. Ben Innes' 'selfie' (it wasn't a selfie – he didn't take the photo), conjured up images of the crew encouraging Mostafa and Innes to take "Just a jump to the left and a step to the right."

But it was no laughing matter. Whilst aircrew, and their passengers, could well be at greater risk of injury and loss of life from the actions of intoxicated or psychologically disturbed unruly passengers than they were from Mostafa, the reality of having an individual claiming that they would kill all on board if demands were not followed is not one that any crewmember would wish to experience.

The legendary tale of DB Cooper, in 1971, is similar in nature to the EgyptAir incident. Cooper, like Mostafa, effectively hijacked the aircraft from the passenger cabin by telling the flight attendants that he had a bomb in his baggage and that he would detonate it if they did not follow his demands. Hakan Ekinci's hijacking of a Turkish Airlines flight in 2006 was achieved by his gaining access to the flight deck, when the cabin crew served coffee to the pilots, and then claiming to be strapped up with C4 plastic explosives; the bulky packaging around his waist was, in reality, newspaper. And, in 2009, a Bolivian priest, Jose Mar Flores, hijacked an Aeromexico flight from the comfort of his seat in the passenger cabin by showing a flight attendant a rather ominous looking device - but which contained no real explosives - that he had assembled in the departure lounge.

Neither Cooper, nor Ekinci, nor Flores, nor Mostafa were terrorists, but their actions were terrorising. The EgyptAir flight attendant, Nayera Atef al-Dabs, admitted at

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a press conference that, "I was crying in the bathroom and I called my sister to tell her to take care of my 3-year-old son."

What happened on board the EgyptAir flight could have happened anywhere in the world, as Mostafa did not possess any prohibited substance that could have been identified by any screening system. Furthermore, as we are outside the remit of terrorist action, similarly disturbed people exist, and fly, in every state. The CCTV footage of Mostafa passing through the archway metal detector in Alexandria is just the latest example of the perils of subjecting everybody to routine pat-down searches without concentrating on the individual's mindset.

But, for me, the anything-but-funny incident has actually illustrated many of the positive lessons we have learned from history. Whilst many argue for a more gung-ho approach to resolving hijacks, especially since 9/11, and immediately trying to overpower an assailant, that is not always the right course of action and could jeopardise the safety of the flight. A little time was wasted and excessive fuel burned but, ultimately, MS181 landed safely in Larnaca without any injuries or loss of life.

Then let's consider how we heard the news of the hijack in the first place. It was EgyptAir itself who announced, via Twitter, "Our flight MS181 is officially hijacked. we'll [sic] publish an official statement now", demonstrating that it had learned the importance of informing the general public and cooperating with the media to avoid wild speculation.

On board, the flight deck door remained locked. Indeed, Captain Amr al-Gamal explained afterwards that he "asked the security officer to stay at the door of the cockpit and not leave." His first officer, Hamad al-Qaddah, recognised that the flight deck had to be protected at all costs as their "main fear was that the hijacker may enter the cockpit, or that he knew how to fly a plane or use it to explode."

In control of the flight deck and trusting the flow of information emanating from the cabin, the pilots elected to follow Mostafa's demands that the aircraft head for Larnaca. On the ground, a textbook process of negotiation played out, culminating in the release of all and the surrender of Mostafa.

The non-selfie 'selfie' story was not quite as ridiculous as it seemed. Indeed, on hearing that Innes had posed for a photograph, the captain had the presence of mind to realise that this might be an excellent way to get important information off the aircraft and into the hands of the authorities. In the WhatsApp-style world we live in, Amr al-Gamal asked the crew to try to take a photo of the hijacker, so, despite her fears, flight attendant Nayera Atef al-Dabs posed with him. For us, in the comfort of our armchairs, the 'suicide vest' looks somewhat unrealistic; for the crew, who had probably never been shown any imagery of such devices before, social media and modern communication offered a way of the threat being evaluated by those professional enough to do so.

Based on what we currently know, rather than criticise, I think the latest hijack is actually a reason for us to commend EgyptAir on an incident well handled. ■

