

# 9/11 + 10: a reflection

By Philip Baum

In many respects it seems like yesterday. In the context of aviation history, however, a decade is a long time. Earlier in 2011 we marked the 80th anniversary of the very first hijacking; the heyday of the Cuban hijack epidemic was half a century ago; and, the famous Ann-Marie Murphy case took place a quarter of a century ago. The reason that the terrorist attacks of 11th September 2001 seem so recent is, in part, because the threat of Islamic fundamentalism in 2011 is as prevalent now as it was then. Add to that the media spectacle of the attacks, where we have images incessantly shown of planes flying into the Twin Towers – no doubt one of the objectives of al Qaeda – providing a graphic portrayal of a terrorist attack in progress, the like of which we have never had with any other attack against aviation before or since, small wonder that the events of that day are indelibly etched in our minds.

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We all remember where we were when the news broke of the attacks. I was in my London office when Miranda (guest booker) from Sky News telephoned to invite me into their TV studios to discuss the lead story in Britain's Daily Mirror on 11th September 2001 which, 13 years after the event, was about the Lockerbie bombing. There was obviously little newsworthy material that morning. I declined the studio invite. Minutes later, the BBC called and asked me to comment on the fact that a plane had flown into the World Trade Centre in New York; I declined to comment again and suggested that they find a pilot or air traffic controller who

could provide expert comment on the nature of flight. Intrigued, however, I logged on to CNN's website...and, as I did so, the phone rang a third time. It was Miranda again. Please would I come in as, now that she was focussing on 2001 rather than 1988, “it looks as if the plane that hit the World Trade Centre had been hijacked”; I readily agreed to come in and, as we were making transportation arrangements, the second flight hit the second tower...

Over the course of a few hours on that fateful morning, the aviation security industry moved into a new era. Despite the fact that it is thought that the hijackers of an Air France Airbus in 1994 had planned on ending their seizure by flying the jet into the city of Paris, and the speculation that, in 1994, Jamal Lya had been a suicidal terrorist on board an Alas Chiricanas flight blown up over Panama, the events of 11th September 2001 clearly demonstrated a new modus operandi had become a reality. That day it was gangs of suicidal pilots; three months later, a lone individual with explosive shoes; in 2004, two suicidal women

carrying out simultaneous attacks with bombs concealed beneath their clothing; in 2006, a plot for groups of men and women to use liquid explosives; in 2009, a device concealed in underwear; and now, in 2011, we hear of a potential plot for suicide bombers to be despatched with devices surgically implanted into their bodies.

Rules that we had in place back in 2001 seem to have lost their value. Take baggage reconciliation for example. The concept of off-loading a bag from an aircraft if the accompanying passenger does not board is actually indicative of the industry's recognition of the

limitations of screening technology; why otherwise should it be off-loaded if it has been screened? The answer was always that, screening was not foolproof but that no passenger would knowingly check in a bomb and blow themselves up. Really?

As always, we saw some measures hastily deployed in the days and months that followed the attacks. Restrictions on ‘sharps’, removal of metal cutlery from meal trays and airside restaurants, bans of flight deck visits by passengers, huge investment into enhanced cockpit doors and the recommencement of sky marshal programmes. In the United States, we also had the Federal Flight Deck Officer programme, which allowed pilots to carry firearms in order to respond to an attack. There has been a huge increase in investment into screening technologies, a more far reaching global audit process spearheaded by ICAO and its regional offshoots and financial assistance proffered to States which struggle to meet the exacting demands of the 21st Century's aviation security system.

An anniversary provides an opportunity for those most closely impacted by a tragedy to honour the lives of their nearest and dearest – family members, friends, work colleagues, neighbours and, in America's case, fellow citizens – as well as being a focal point for reflection on the events of the incident itself and the starting point of the measuring stick against which progress subsequently achieved can be assessed.

In August 2002 I wrote an article entitled 11th September Syndrome, the essence of which was that there were many in the industry, and beyond, who were suddenly viewing the entire threat as being that of suicidal pilots trying to gain access to the cockpits of commercial aircraft, murdering the crew and then flying into population



centres...always in the name of Islam. I still believe that is a prevalent mindset, to the point that other threats are often ignored or are left unaddressed.

The deficiencies of the screening checkpoint are finally being addressed by the international community in the form of the Checkpoint of the Future. But, the roll out period will be lengthy. It also only focuses on passenger screening. There are, in my opinion, three other areas that simply must be given greater attention: the insider threat, the capability of aircrew to respond to an attack of any kind should it occur and last, but by no means least, the calibre of security personnel.

Attend an industry trade show and one can be mesmerised by the current capabilities of the screening technology now available; highly sophisticated tools enabling us to differentiate between various materials and detect threat substances. In the conference hall, however, we hear constant pleas for a greater focus on human factors. Who are the people that are going to be using these advanced technologies?

I am a frequent traveller and the issue that irks me most as I make my way through security checkpoints is the fact that, ten years after an event that demonstrated the professionalism and outside the box thinking of our adversaries, in the vast majority of countries there is a straitjacket approach to screening, where free thinking is frowned upon. If we truly want to honour the 2994 people who lost their lives on 11th September 2001, and the tens of thousands in the resultant wars, it's about time we started to address this issue.

Wouldn't it be encouraging if it were the contract screening companies that were exhibiting at trade shows and advertising in journals, selling best practice and encouraging us to buy their services because they were more effective at detecting explosives, narcotics, forged

documents, victims of human trafficking, potentially disruptive passengers and terrorists than their competitors? In fact, we need to ask ourselves why they rarely do. The answer, I'm afraid, is that the margins are just not there to cover such expenditure as, in most States around the globe, screening contracts go to the lowest bidder who can also demonstrate that they have the capability of meeting the minimum standards. Even in States where screening is performed by government personnel, the lack of professionalism, in its true sense, and core knowledge is frightening as demonstrated by the jaw dropping stories that appear in the media.

I plan to be in New York on 11th September 2011, in part to pay my respects to those whose lives were stolen, but also (for the next issue) to look at what steps have been taken to rebuild a city. It is interesting to note that the architects of Ground Zero have planned to build yet another iconic structure that will become a landmark on the Manhattan skyline. True, it may be yet another target that has to be guarded...such is the nature of things... but it is a clear demonstration of the fact that New Yorkers are not going to allow a group of misguided fanatics to terrorise them and change the way in which they live their daily lives.

That is the lesson the industry should learn. Our mission should be to make air travel what it once was. There are those who say it can never be the same again. Why not? We can apply layer after layer of security that will ultimately suffocate the industry, but to what avail when our opponents will be looking at fresh attack scenarios that bypass our excessive zeal to respond to yesterday's plot.

With the right people, appropriately trained, deployed at screening points and flying our aircraft, we can provide both better security and better facilitation. By

restricting liquids, aerosols and gels, the terrorists win. By asking passengers to routinely remove their shoes, belts and jackets, the terrorists win. By stopping children travelling with craft scissors

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(come on, we all know what we can do with a broken bottle of duty free) and adults with knitting needles, the terrorists win. By making us stand in lengthy queues, the terrorists win. By instigating laborious and unworkable flight deck door procedures, the terrorist win. By banning metal knives from meal trays (still a policy in some States) and making passengers struggle with plastic, yet strangely sharper, knives, the terrorists win. And by having a blanket policy that makes it illegal for kids to go and visit the Captain in-flight, the terrorists win.

The tenth anniversary of 11th September 2001 should be the *Carpe Diem* – seize the day - moment for the industry. Our security programme must be robust and effective, but one that means that we are the winners, not the enemy. In the next year, not the next decade, let's set that as our priority... and dedicate it to those who perished on 11th September 2001. ■

