INTERVIEW: CAPTAIN VLADIMIR 'VLATKO' VODOPIVEC

One year ago, on 2nd February 2016, Daallo Airlines flight 159 departed Mogadishu bound for Djibouti. In the cockpit's left-hand seat was an experienced Serbian captain, Vladimir (Vlatko) Vodopivec, who had no idea that this was to be his final flight. Shortly after departure, a passenger, seated in a window seat in the sixteenth row, detonated, either knowingly or unwittingly, the improvised explosive device concealed within the laptop computer he had brought on board – one given to him, after the screening checkpoint, by airport-based employees. The blast ripped a hole in the Airbus' fuselage and sucked Abdullahi Abdisalam Borleh out of the aircraft. But the explosion had taken place at relatively low altitude and **Captain Vodopivec** was able to maintain control of the aircraft and return to, and safely land in, the Somali capital. On the anniversary of the attack, **Philip Baum** travelled to Belgrade to meet with the heroic commander to hear his account of the Daallo Airlines bombing.

PB: How long have you been flying?

VV: I started flying here, for JAT [Jugoslovenski Aerotransport], 44 years ago when I was 22 and I became a first officer. At age 28 I became a captain and then, when I was 35 or 36, I moved for the first time to Adria Airways in Slovenia. We [Serbia and Slovenia] were together at that time [as part of Yugoslavia], but then the war started - the civil war between our countries. I moved to Macedonia, then Montenegro and, after the war, to Africa, starting with Nigeria, and then Cameroon, Gambia, Egypt, Djibouti. I've been flying in a lot of places where there have been wars. Everywhere I go! I also flew for five years [for BelleAir] in Albania.

PB: And working for Daallo Airlines?

VV: This was a contract for Daallo. I was employed by Hermes Airlines, a Greek company. They had six aircraft, [of which] Daallo had one in Djibouti and one in Dubai and covered the countries between the United Arab Emirates and Kenya. Mostly the passengers are from Somalia; that's where the money is also from - Somali money invested in the company. We used to go there for one month, then off for two weeks and then one month again. That's the operation.

PB: So you were living in Somalia?

VV: No, Djibouti. We were living in the Kempinski Hotel, or, at times, in Dubai close to the airport, flying two days on, one day off; it's a normal operation with these two Airbus A-321. Flying there, it's really wild; you can't compare it to normal aviation [like] in Europe, because these airports are like Mogadishu - never safe at all. You don't have met [meteorology] reports, you don't have communication, nothing, it's HF [high frequency] communication. It's a piece of asphalt and nothing else; no lights, no ILS [instrument landing system], nothing, not even NDB [non-directional beacon]; nothing. You come, if it's good weather, you'll land and that's it. Especially Mogadishu, it's dangerous. You can only use one direction for the landing because on the other side is a city, if you can call it a city. If you approach from over the city for the landing, it's 150 metres from where they are shooting for fun! That is why we always land from the sea-side with 20-25 knots tailwind… which is not allowed, but it's the only

way. All operations there are very… shall we say…dangerous.

PB: So you had flown into Mogadishu many times?

VV: Yes. I first flew there in 1986 with JAT, but at that time it was much better - peaceful, not like now.

PB: How well did you know the crew that you were flying with last February?

VV: Well, as we spent a month there [on each tour of duty], living like a family; three [sets of] crew on the two aircraft. The crew [on D3 159] was what you would call 'international': two girls from Greece, one girl from Bosnia and the other three were local staff - two guys and one girl were from Kenya and two from Djibouti. Every crew is the same: three locals and three from other countries. We always had six cabin crew.

PB: And with you on the flight deck?

VV: On the flight deck were only the captain and first officer. We had generally very, very young and inexperienced first officers because that was the policy of Hermes company. The guys go there and pay to fly because they need 500 hours to try to find a job somewhere else.

PB: So where was your first officer from?

VV: He was 23 or 24 years old, 220 hours, zero experience but he was really very good - an Italian guy, Riccardo [Bonaldi]. And the funny thing, perhaps the only good thing to come out of the

Captain Vodopivec has had considerable experience flying in Africa and was photographed here in Abuja, Nigeria.

> "…Mogadishu, it's dangerous. You can only use one direction for the landing because on the other side is a city. If you approach from over the city for the landing, it's 150 metres from where they are shooting for fun…"

experience, was that he had applied to some [other] companies for a job but every time the answer was, "Wait for the 500 hours then send the documents". Always the same answer. But the day after the incident, they sent him a message, "OK, you are accepted, you've had the experience!" One month later he sent me the contract [to see].

PB: On 2 February last year you were carrying Turkish Airlines passengers?

VV: Yes. I had a flight from Djibouti to Mogadishu and back that was scheduled, with ninety-something to Mogadishu and five passengers on the flight back to Djibouti. Then they told me, "You have 87." Why? Nobody knew why. They boarded the people; they were a little bit late – 20 minutes I think. Depending on what type of bomb it was, maybe these 20 minutes saved our lives. In 20 minutes we'd have been at 30,000 and then: goodbye!

PB: What were you told about the Turkish Airlines flight?

VV: We found out that Turkish had cancelled their flight and that they had received a warning from somebody before about a bomb two days before. But, they didn't tell anyone about this warning [at the time and later claimed that they had cancelled the flight due to weather]. Why [would they bomb Turkish Airlines]? To me, it's stupid because all the investments in the airport are from Turkish Airlines; they built a new building there with all these security facilities. Everything is brand new, but I don't know if it's working or not.

PB: Why do you believe that Daallo Airlines was not the intended target?

VV: Because it was not logical. We were a Somali company, carrying only Somali people, with Somali money invested in it. There was no reason to put a bomb on our aircraft. Whenever we were going somewhere, I used to check [research] something about the country, about its people, and whatever I could find on the Internet. Or, I asked somebody. I spent almost ten years in Africa, and that's the only way to survive there.

PB: After landing, who did the authorities tell you was responsible?

VV: They wrote a report that said that maybe the cabin staff made a mistake, that maybe they activated one of the [oxygen] canisters, which was stupid. I told them that I didn't want to sign that report. The chief of security at the airport said, "OK, in that case, you have to stay here. You can't go." I told them, "OK, I will stay, but I am not signing anything." I asked them to release my crew and they told me they could go, but they [the crew] didn't want to go without me so they sent us all to the hotel.

PB: Where did you stay?

VV: I didn't want to go to the hotel downtown because two weeks earlier the crew of a small business jet went to a hotel there and the next morning they had disappeared…which is a normal thing there. They told us, "The airport area is the safest place in Somalia. All the missions, the United Nations; everyone is there." I agreed and they called two

CCTV footage shows airport employees handing the computer containing the bomb to Borleh.

DAALLO AIRLINES BOMBING: THE CABIN CREW PERSPECTIVE

So often, summaries of aviation security events downplay – and sometimes ignore altogether – the crucial role that cabin crew play in times of crisis. But cabin crew are the main point of contact between an airline and its passengers, and the eyes and ears of the flight. With this in mind, the following is an account by **Alexandra James**, of what happened inside the cabin of flight D3159 on 2nd February 2016, informed by interviews conducted by **Philip Baum** with senior purser, **Tania Zacharia**, and flight attendant, **Mirna Bešlagić**.

Arguably the most disconcerting aspect of the Daallo incident from a crew's perspective was that everything – the route, the passengers, the flight – in the words of Mirna Bešlagić "seemed normal"…

Despite operating in an area considered 'high risk', the crew were used to the route between Mogadishu and Djibouti, and felt well supported by their training. Tania Zacharia, the senior purser, said that they had "learnt in detail about the procedures of high-risk area security. So, on that flight of 2nd February, and after we had finished the catering and the cleaning, the entire crew reviewed the high-risk area security procedures". Also, despite the number of passengers being, according to Bešlagić, "much higher than usual" due to Turkish Airlines cancelling their flight to the same destination, Zacharia said that "all the passengers seemed and behaved normally".

Mirna Bešlagić (left) working for Hermes Airlines on an Iraqi Airways contract. Tania Zacharia (right) was the purser on Daallo Airlines flight 159.

> "…the interphone was not working and the keypad for the door was destroyed. The only way to reach them was to knock on the door…"

The explosion occurred a mere ten minutes into the flight. Zacharia pinpoints this to "just after the seat-belt signs were switched off and just after we got up from our jump seats." She was about to close the curtain between the cabin and front galley in order to start

Mirna Bešlagić alongside the Daallo Airlines bus at Mogadishu airport on 3rd February 2016 (Credit: Mirna Bešlagić).

The hotel in Mogadishu with rooms on Oxford Street, Baker Street, Regent Street and Saville Row (Credit: Capt. Vodopivec)

military cars. I jumped in and we went there. It's like – I don't know ¬– in a movie! Walls with machine guns and everything! We went inside but I didn't see any buildings that could be [termed] a hotel, but there were sixty-something containers, you know, shipping containers, and they were the apartments! So I took a photo. You see the street names? Baker Street…and Oxford Street! [Also Regent Street and Saville Row.]

PB: How long did you stay there?

VV: For two nights. Then they wrote a new report, which I signed and they released us.

PB: Generally, when you flew into Mogadishu, did you stay on board the aircraft or did you have an opportunity on your previous visits to actually see the airport security operations or the airport itself?

VV: Yes, we were allowed to go out. Especially when they built this new terminal. It was a miracle in Africa! We used to go out to see how it works. But, when I parked the aircraft and open the door, thirty to fifty people come to [greet] the aircraft. No ID, no uniform, nothing! You don't know who is who, but it's normal there because our problem - the biggest problem there - is the weight, and the loading is very important. We don't have any agency there; every company is doing everything themselves: the loading, the distribution, load sheet, documents. And all the time it's fifty degrees outside and there are only forty minutes to check around the aircraft.

PB: What about security?

VV: There is zero. Later on, as I said, they tried to push the blame onto us. Then people from the city came. I don't know who they were. They gave me their names, but they meant nothing to me. And finally we agreed that it was a bomb and they didn't know how [it had made it on board]. Actually, the aircraft stayed there until two months ago. They moved it somewhere.

PB: What can you tell me about the flight that day?

VV: The weather was nice. It's always nice weather there. We departed normally.

PB: Twenty minutes late?

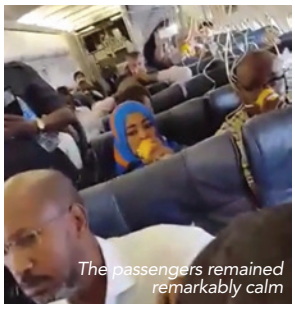
VV: Altogether about eighteen or nineteen minutes, but after ten minutes, at just above 11,400 feet, it happened. I flew the flight from Djibouti to Mogadishu, the next flight [out of Mogadishu] was with the first officer – he was flying, everything was normal, and then, after ten minutes, there was the explosion. There was a lot of dust in the cockpit. Everything came into the cockpit, and there was a lot of pressure from behind. Even my sunglasses, which were on, came off. In the beginning, I thought it was a window. But that was not possible because the differential pressure was not that big… I had something like 2.8 in mind. I could not say for sure. We had the decompression checklist on display and aircraft warnings. I tried to contact the cabin but her phone was on the floor somewhere and she couldn't find it. She was knocking on the door. We couldn't open the door.

PB: When you say you couldn't open the door, you physically couldn't open it?

VV: Yes, physically, because of the explosion. And then she called one of the passengers from the first row. And they knocked the door and they opened it. She reported to me that there was a bomb.

PB: Did she actually say 'a bomb'?

VV: Explosion, not bomb. But it smelled like a bomb. It was a bomb, one hundred percent. I asked her where and she told me, "The eleventh row"' I said to move all the passengers from the first few rows to the back. She was really OK - calm. Two of them were senior pursers, a Greek and a Bosnian girl, they were in front and the rest were at the back. She moved the passengers and they did not say a word. Really I was surprised…by the passengers especially. They just picked up their phones and started recording [filming]! On the other side, in the cockpit, he [Bonaldi] was flying. I took over the controls because it was not logical. The autopilot was off, then we lost auto-thrust. I think we lost navigation too. These three things, I don't know why. Maybe because of this explosion, nothing else. I took the controls and I told him, "Riccardo! Procedure", but he didn't move, so I hit him in the shoulder and said, "Procedure!" and then he started doing everything perfectly. In the beginning, I called Mogadishu and I told them we needed to return, declared an emergency [despite media reports to the contrary] and requested a priority landing. Actually, my first idea when it happened was, "Can I go somewhere else?" because the last place I wanted to go was Mogadishu! If [only] there was somewhere else close, but I didn't know how big the hole was and what was working and not working. So I decided to go there [Mogadishu] – with a short visual approach.


The passengers remained remarkably calm

"…I took the controls and I told him, "Riccardo! Procedure", but he didn't move, so I hit him in the shoulder and said, "Procedure!" and then he started doing everything perfectly…"

PB: How was the landing?

VV: Usually we land, then continue to the end of the runway, turn around and taxi back towards the terminal, but to avoid all of this, I landed at the beginning of the runway with full brakes, exited the runway and parked in front of the building. I told them [cabin crew] there was no need for an emergency evacuation. I tried to avoid this because sometimes people get injured - in an evacuation everyone panics. They [the crew]

"...the crew managed to communicate from opposite ends of the plane using, as Zacharia puts it, 'body language'..."

>>> preparing for passenger service when "I heard a loud noise and I saw flames and black smoke move from the right side of the aircraft to the back".

Bešlagić was in the cabin at the time, and was the member of cabin crew closest to the explosion: "I felt pressure in my ears and suddenly had a temporary loss of hearing. The first thing I saw was a huge hole in the body of the aircraft on its right side." Although both Zacharia and Bešlagić witnessed the explosion, their first reaction was that it had been caused by a technical problem.

"The first thing that came to my mind", said Bešlagić "was realisation that this was an emergency, and all the emergency procedures started popping into my mind. At first I thought it was decompression, because all the oxygen masks fell down".

Zacharia added: "I thought that we had a serious technical problem, but when I saw the 'opening' immediately I realised that it was a bomb".

At this point, it became clear that the explosion had not only seriously damaged the aircraft, but it had also severed contact between the cabin and the flight deck. Zacharia quickly discovered that, 'the interphone was not working and the keypad for the door was destroyed. The only way to reach them was to knock on the door. The first time that I knocked, they didn't answer. After a while, I tried again, and again no answer'.

In addition, communication within the cabin itself was limited as several of the crew experienced short-term deafness immediately following the explosion, plus the wind rushing through the tear in the fuselage made speaking to one another – as well as movement around the cabin – almost impossible. However, the crew managed to communicate from opposite ends of the plane using, as Zacharia puts it, 'body language' and eventually the flight deck door was opened, allowing her to inform the flight deck crew of the situation in the cabin. 'I informed him about the flames, the sound and the opening in the fuselage. I asked him if we had any other technical problems and he answered, "No, everything is under control." He informed me that in 14 minutes we would land in Mogadishu. I asked him if it will be a normal landing, and he answered me, "yes"'.

Having established contact with the flight deck, the cabin crew jumped into action to manage the situation within the cabin. 'The first thing I did,' said Bešlagić, 'was approach the passengers who were nearest to me to check that they were alright, and also to check that I could hear well.'

They proceeded to reseat the passengers nearest the site of the explosion, helping them to move towards the rear of the aircraft. They also provided water, and made frequent announcements, reassuring them that everything would be all right. Mirna Bešlagić commented that at this point inside the cabin, 'the situation was oddly calm'.

"...the situation was oddly calm..."

Within a few minutes, they had landed back in Mogadishu where the emergency services were waiting for them. Disembarkation was completed calmly using the aircraft's steps, the two injured passengers leaving the plane first. Once the passengers had disembarked, the crew checked the cabin before leaving themselves. Bešlagić said, 'We had to run into the airport as there was a suspicion that another explosion might occur inside of the aircraft and it was still unclear what had actually happened.'

Once inside the terminal, the crew were met by the Commander of Civil Aviation, and the long administrative process and investigation began.

Zacharia told us that after the incident, she stayed with Daallo Airlines for another two months but only flew again six months later for a different company. Similarly, Mirna Bešlagić didn't fly again for another seven months and never flew with Hermes or Daallo again.

We asked both crewmembers what lessons might be learned from the incident, and whether they felt they should have been given more (or better quality) training that would have helped them prevent the incident or better respond to it. Bešlagić commented that it would not be possible in high-risk areas to "prevent these kinds of incidents >>>

"...it's blood from the finger of the guy who activated the bomb..."

disembarked the passengers. I let the crew go down and I checked the aircraft. The row [where Borleh had been seated] was [still] smoking so I used the extinguisher on it. Then I disembarked.

PB: What happened next?

VV: They told me, "OK, move the aircraft to the other side now because there is some military apron two kilometres from this terminal." I said, "No, I'm not going there. If you want to take it there, then [you] take it there." Then we were finished and we started with all the paperwork, which was a terrible, never-ending story without any results.

PB: At what point did you – or did the cabin crew – know that a passenger had been sucked out of the aircraft?

VV: Immediately, because sitting in the eleventh row was this Bosnian girl [flight attendant] who was facing back. And she was looking at the guy from five or six metres away. It was like she was sitting in the front row of the cinema!

PB: So she actually witnessed exactly what happened?

VV: Yes, she saw it. When I saw her for the first time after, she had some blood [on her face]. I told her she was injured and she told me, "No, it's blood from the finger of the guy who activated the bomb." It hit her in her face. Not a nice story. Next to him [Borleh] was sitting somebody, and he was the only one who was injured more seriously. He left the aircraft with the other passengers normally – walking - but with a lot of blood on his face.

PB: I've seen the CCTV images of the screening checkpoint at the airport, and the videos that people were taking on board the aircraft were quite amazing, as it did seem very, very calm on board. But were you specifically aware of any criminal activity before the flight or made aware of any on board?

VV: One of the biggest businesses there is qaat [sometimes khat or qat]. It's a kind of drug, a grass. It's from Somalia and Ethiopia, and it's in Djibouti. I was there

The hole created by the blast.

for the first time [years ago] with a DC-9 and we had ten rows for the passengers. They moved all the seats for the qaat. Qaat is much more important than the passengers! If we were too heavy, they would disembark passengers, not the qaat. They are [still] fighting every day at the airport, ten metres from the aircraft, fighting for this, for the qaat.

PB: From what you know, is there any question as to whether the passenger who blew himself up was suicidal or could it have been that he was duped and believed he was smuggling drugs?

VV: I don't know. Because now we are thinking that it was a time bomb. It activated too early [so he would not have knowingly detonated it] and, also, he sat in the sixteenth row [16F], which was the worst place - for them. For us, it was good! You [should] go to the back [of the aircraft] to destroy the commands, to destroy the elevator and everything. But everything was working after the explosion, except for a few things.

PB: But it was close to the fuel tank?

VV: Yes, but above them.

> "...they moved all the seats for the qaat. Qaat is much more important than the passengers..."

PB: What were you told about the bomb itself?

VV: Nothing. [All I know is that if the detonation had been] at thirty thousand, the differential pressure would have caused this hole to be five metres, not one metre. I think that then we wouldn't have survived...no way.

PB: So, going back to the detonation of the device itself, what was the first indicator for you? Was it the sound? Was it the blast wave?

VV: It was the blast and the sound at the same time.

PB: And initially you thought it was just the window?

VV: I couldn't imagine something else. The newspapers said that I was

>>> as a crew of the aircraft. The only people who can prevent them are airport security, which needs to be on a much higher level."

There were, however, reassuring lessons to be learned from a CRM (crew resource management) perspective. From Zacharia's point of view, "The most important thing on this dangerous flight was the CRM of the cockpit and the cabin crew. The teamwork and the communication between cockpit and cabin crew was very successful. As the senior of this flight, I would like to thank Captain Vodopivec, because he was very calm; he briefed me clearly and he answered all my questions. I would also like to thank the cabin crew for their teamwork."

"…the atrocity was, for Bešlagić, a kind of rebirth…"

Finally, we asked them how they felt the incident had impacted them personally, and what, if anything, they would do on 2nd February 2017 to mark the anniversary of the incident. Zacharia still says that she loves her job but that she "respects my life more, so from now on I refuse to fly to all these countries." On 2nd February "I will go to church. If I have a flight, I will fly, but if not I will go to the gym, I will meet my friends."

Bešlagić still regards being a flight attendant as a "dream job" and that she "will continue to build my career regardless of this event." She said that, "it made me appreciate life more, as well as my colleagues and the aviation world in general. I have come to the conclusion that people in aviation have an incredible amount of responsibility towards the people on their flight and that our reaction can immensely help in the worst-case scenarios. Life went on normally. I just appreciate small moments in life much more than before and also keep my eyes open on every flight." On 2nd February, Bešlagić "will try to contact my crew from the flight to see how they are and to share some memories, and probably have a flight that day."

Surviving the atrocity was, for Bešlagić, a kind of rebirth. "I consider this date to be something like my second birthday, even thought the real one is just 21 days later. So two birthdays for me for the rest of my life!"

flying, that the first officer went back to check - some stupid things. Invented. Journalists!

PB: After that incident, how long was it until you flew again?

VV: That was my last flight. I was a few days there in Djibouti in a hotel. They organised transportation for all of us. We went back to Athens, because the head office of the company is there. I spent two or three days there with the Greek accident investigator. Then I came home to Belgrade. I told them, "Give me ten days, two weeks and then you can call me again." But they were prolonging things. In the beginning of April, I was scheduled for my medical check because my licence was expiring. But they didn't call to schedule me. I called them again: "OK, no problem, no problem." Then the company went bankrupt, not for this reason [the bomb]; Hermes Airlines was a member of a French company, Air Méditerranée which has a few hundred aircraft. Air Méditerranée were in court for some tax problems and they declared bankruptcy. He [the boss] opened a new company one month later with the same staff, same aircraft, everything. And that's how I finished my career.

PB: Were Hermes supportive?

VV: They didn't pay me. They owe [me] fifty, sixty thousand. They used to be two or three months late with the salaries. It was, let's say, normal.

PB: So your last paycheque was when?

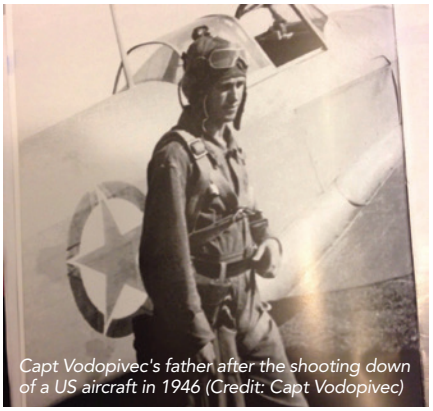
VV: October 2015.

PB: Four months before the bombing?

VV: Yes. I hired a lawyer in Greece but…nothing.

PB: Do you think there was any training that your crew – either flight deck or cabin crew ¬– could have been given that might have helped either prevent the incident or better respond to it?

VV: To prevent something [like this] is on the airport. It's not on us. We are ready for the bomb when we find a bomb somewhere; not after the explosion. We train and we do things on the simulator and we know what we are going to do but that's without adrenalin and everything



Capt Vodopivec's father after the shooting down of a US aircraft in 1946 (Credit: Capt Vodopivec)

else. You never how you are going to react. For me, training is very, very important.

PB: What about the calibre of the crew?

VV: I don't have a good opinion about the training of crew. Now you can become a captain within two months; from being a first officer to captain, which is not normal for me. I was the youngest in JAT, but my training was three years. I had to pass [land at] all airports in Europe. I had to pass all airports with every instructor and that was 11 [different] instructors. I had to fly in the winter, autumn, summer: all seasons! And after that, I could go for the exam. Now, within two months from the right seat to the left! It's not dependent on knowledge or talent. I have met hundreds of first officers, even captains without any experience in, let's say 'normal' aviation; they don't know about meteorology, they don't know even navigation because somebody is doing it for them. People are not thinking anymore. I was not an instructor there [in Hermes], but when I met him [Bonaldi] for the first time I thought, "OK, I am Vladmir, you are Riccardo. Listen, because we are going to fly together for one month. I will talk too much because there is nothing to do!" On the aircraft everything is automatic! I tried to speak with him about everything. If we were passing a cloud, I asked him, "Do you know what kind of cloud that is? Should we avoid it from the left or the right? Why?" And these people, they are hungry for the knowledge. But there are some others who don't care. I don't know the [exact] percentage, but about eighty percent of catastrophes are human [error], and the reason is this. The aircraft are built better than before… especially Airbus. They have protection for the aircraft from the pilot. If you want to turn the aircraft on its back, unless you are Denzel Washington it's not possible - there are a lot of things you cannot do. There are speed protections and if you have a higher speed, it will

retract the speed automatically, the flaps also. They made an offer for me to continue as an instructor but I told them, "No, thank you. I cannot teach people things which I don't believe in." But that's life: everything changes.

PB: Bearing in mind you have been impacted by a terrorist attack, what do you think the aviation community should be doing to better control or to prevent such an incident happening again?

VV: You cannot close all holes. Let's talk about Tel Aviv airport… you have the first checks five kilometres before the building. And even then something can happen. If somebody decides to commit suicide, you can't stop him. They will find a way. You can do everything, and, OK, reduce the possibility for them, but you can't prevent it completely.

PB: But in places like Mogadishu, or even Djibouti, what steps do you think the industry could take?

VV: Everybody can access the apron [there]. You can see everyone; walking…horses, cows. It's really not like an airport, even though the Turkish have invested a lot of money especially on security. The north part of Somalia, close to Djibouti, is called Hargeisa - the other airport that we flew to. Somaliland. It's at 5000 feet ¬¬– high elevation – and completely different people - much friendlier. We cannot do baggage check in Mogadishu, no chance. But in Hargeisa, everything is organised, they are doing baggage checks, their loading is normal. But even though they have a new terminal in Mogadishu, it means nothing.

PB: So, you have retired primarily because of age?

VV: Yes. I was 65 six months ago. With all the paperwork and waiting for my medical, it worked out that the Daallo flight was my last one.

PB: How do think the incident has impacted on your life in the last year? How has it changed you as a person?

VV: Much less than retirement! Because I have a problem now: I am doing nothing! I was not prepared because it started six months earlier than I expected. But about this [bombing], no. I was famous for a few months. All the TV stations, journalists were calling me. When I went to a restaurant, everybody would say, "That is the guy with the bomb!" But one year has passed and now it's back to the beginning.

PB: And how do you feel about talking about that incident now?

VV: OK. Sure afterwards I was a little stressed. Was I afraid? Yes. Afterwards though – not at the time. At the time I was like a machine. For me the point is that maybe I was stupid. They didn't pay me. In some other countries - if it had happened in America - I would be a millionaire. But here, especially because of this Greek mentality - I don't know if you know anything about them except for their [inventing] democracy, but they are very, very lazy; they don't work, they are not responsible. If it had happened in some other, normal country, I could go to court, through insurance, but here it is zero, nothing.

PB: Why did you get into aviation?

VV: My father was a pilot too. In the military, he shot down one American aircraft in 1946 after the World War II; this American aircraft had entered Yugoslav territory. This is a photo of my father in 1946 after the shooting down. He was also named Vladimir. Later on he joined JAT. He was actually hijacked [to Bari, Italy, by a man with a gun] in the former Yugoslavia. It was [8 July] 1959 on a flight from Tivat, Montenegro to Belgrade.

PB: So, are you planning on doing anything special on 2nd February this year?

VV: Yes. Next to my home is a nice restaurant. The owner is my very good friend. We opened it together. It was called 'Icarus' because a lot of pilots used to go there. Now it's different but we celebrate everything there: birthdays, Christmas, New Year, everything we celebrate in this restaurant with music.

Philip Baum met with Capt Vodopivec in Belgrade on 24 January 2017

Editorial Postscript:

Responsibility: Eleven days after the bombing, al-Shabaab issued a statement: "Harakat Al-Shabaab Al Mujahideen carried out the airborne operation as a retribution for the crimes committed by the coalition of Western crusaders and their intelligence agencies against the Muslims of Somalia." They confirmed that Turkish Airlines had been the intended target as, in part, Turkey was a member of NATO.

Abdiweli Mohamed Maow, the security officer convicted of preparing the bomb

Perpetrators: On 30 May 2016, 10 people were sentenced for crimes related to the bombing, including the head of security for the civil aviation authority. Two of the men were sentenced to life imprisonment. In an interview with Reuters, Mumin Abdullahi, the deputy prosecutor for Somalia's national security forces, said "Abdiweli Mohamed, the security head of the civil aviation, and Areys Hashi, who was the funder but absent [sentenced in absentia], were sentenced to life imprisonment by the court. Areys Hashi is a member of al-Shabaab who funded the operation." The other eight were airport-based employees, including security screeners, a police officer, a porter and immigration officers.

Abdullahi Abdisalam Borleh: Little is known about the man who carried the bomb onto the aircraft. He was a teacher of Qu'ran at an Islamic school, but was not thought to be radical; he had told people in his hometown that he was going to Turkey for medical treatment. And maybe he thought he was. He certainly – as can be seen in the CCTV footage of him at the airport receiving the laptop – walked with a limp and he did have travel documents for entry into Turkey. So, despite references in the media to his being a 'suicide bomber', he may well have been duped. One plausible scenario is that, given that the explosion took place just after the seat belt signs were turned off, and so at the point in time when passengers could turn on their electrical items, Borleh turned on the computer thereby initiating the detonation. Borleh was sucked out of the aircraft and residents in the area of Dhiiqooley reportedly saw his burnt body fall from the sky.