



# A Personal View

Expressed by Philip Baum

On 11th September 2001, 19 hijackers changed the world and the way we view aviation security...but not, seemingly, the way threat is assessed. 15 of them were from Saudi Arabia, two were from the United Arab Emirates, and one each from Egypt and Lebanon. In the other major attacks against American aviation interests, Richard Reid – the shoe bomber – was British, and Umar Farouk Abdulmuttalab – the underpants bomber – was Nigerian. According to New America, “Of the twelve lethal jihadist terrorists in the United States since 9/11: three are African-Americans, three are from families that hailed originally from Pakistan, one is from a family that came from the Palestinian Territories, two came from Russia as children, one emigrated from Egypt and conducted his attack a decade after coming to the United States, and one each had families that originally came from Kuwait and Afghanistan”. And yet Donald Trump signs an Executive Order implying that the nationals of Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Iran, Somalia, Libya, and Yemen are our primary concern.

But it is another attack on the soil of a US airport that I wish to focus on. That of 6th January this year when Santiago-Ruiz – a US citizen, born in New Jersey and Iraq War combat veteran – flew into Fort Lauderdale, claimed his suitcase at the baggage carousel, entered the toilets, loaded a Walther PPS 9mm semi-automatic, and then walked back into the arrivals area only to start shooting, randomly killing five people and injuring in excess of 40 others (eight of whom as a result of bullet wounds, the rest from the ensuing chaos). This was, however, not a failure of the aviation security system.

The fact that Santiago-Ruiz had left his temporary residence at the Qupqugiaq Inn in Anchorage, made his way to the airport and boarded a Delta flight to Minneapolis, with onward connection to Fort Lauderdale, with a gun in his bag is almost irrelevant. He could just as easily have been a resident of Florida, made his way to the airport and carried out the same atrocity without even boarding an aircraft.

There are a multitude of reasons why individuals should, with the correct paperwork in place, be able to check guns onto a flight within their hold baggage: to participate in sports events, to hunt, as members of law enforcement, for use as theatrical props and as part of historical collections to name a few. That is a globally accepted practice. In order to do so, bearers of such weaponry need to bring them to the airport at the point of departure and collect them on arrival. We could insist that firearms are always shipped and never brought to the airport terminal, but, as with so many other security protocols, it's the good people who suffer the resulting inconvenience and the target simply moves to the shipper's facilities.

Questionable, however, was Santiago-Ruiz's ability to carry a firearm anywhere, let alone at an airport. After all, yes, the innocent victims of this atrocity happened to be in Terminal 2 at Fort Lauderdale International Airport, but, equally, those who died could have been in a shopping mall, theatre district, visiting a sports event or at a tourist attraction. This January's attack happened in the public area of the airport – and there will always be a line that delineates the start and end of a security-restricted zone.

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Commentators have expressed concerns that this attack demonstrated a weakness in aviation security. They have drawn attention to the ease with which those within the airport terminal accessed the ramp when the shooting began as if it implied a lack of preparedness on the part of airport management. Yet emergency exits are designed, and left unlocked, for that very purpose – to enable people to escape when necessary. Who cares whether airport operations are brought to a standstill when people's lives are being threatened? It takes time to ensure, in the aftermath, that the area is once again sterile, but the alternative would have been to potentially force airport users in the direction of danger and/or prevent the emergency services reaching the airport at all. The crowds were probably best, and most securely, contained on the airfield.

There will be a multitude of lessons to be learned from the event, but some of the fundamental ones were those which we are supposed to have learned a long time back. Firstly, the importance of connecting the dots in order to protect society. Santiago-Ruiz had served in the Alaska Army National Guard, but was discharged for unsatisfactory performance in August 2016. In November, he took himself to the FBI's offices in Anchorage and claimed that his mind was being controlled by the government, that he was being forced to watch jihadist videos and that the CIA wanted him to join Islamic State. The police took him for a mental health evaluation, which resulted in his gun permit being temporarily rescinded. It was, however, reinstated after he was neither committed to a mental health unit nor convicted of any crime. The warning signs were there – not that any aviation entity would be targeted but that Santiago-Ruiz was a danger to society.

The Second Amendment to the US Constitution highlights the belief that “the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.” But the statistics are disturbing. By the end of the first week of January this year there had been over 200 people killed by guns in the US; at the time of writing this article (10 Feb), the number stands at 1,690 (excluding suicides), with there having been 35 mass shooting incidents.

Immigration policy and state security are pressing challenges for us all, especially when, as Hans-Georg Maassen, the head of Germany's domestic intelligence agency said (on 3 Feb) that, in respect of Europe, ISIS “terrorists are being smuggled in, camouflaged as refugees”. That might explain Trump's short-term Executive Order, and perhaps we ought to be wary of being stirred up into a frenzy by the media rhetoric implying that this was a “Muslim ban”, which it was not, and a permanent state of play, which it was never claimed to be. But it seems to me that the Trump administration has plenty of ‘bad people’ to worry about back home and the real lesson learned from the Fort Lauderdale shooting should be that anybody can pose a threat – including decorated army veterans. Ensuring that we remove guns from society as a whole, rather than just off airport premises, should be our objective. ■