

Stopping a knife-wielding attacker in an airliner cabin isn't easy, but you can learn how to do it.



PHOTOS: JOCELYN AUGUSTINO

Takin' It to the Mat

Three pilots serving in ALPA security positions try out the new, streamlined federal Crew Member Self-Defense Training program.

By Jan W. Steenblik, Technical Editor

THWACK! Capt. Ed Folsom (United) twisted slightly at the waist and put the force of his shoulder behind the strike as his forearm, tightened into a formidable weapon of bone and tensed muscle by bending his elbow, struck his target.

"STOP! GET BACK! HELP!" Capt. Folsom yelled.

First Officer Scott Graham (United), holding a thick training mat, absorbed the blow and braced for another. THWACK! Capt. Folsom's elbow

flashed out again, and small beads of sweat began to glisten on his forehead.

F/O Graham, the ALPA National Security Committee's liaison to federal law enforcement agencies, and Capt. Folsom, the United pilots' MEC Security Committee chairman, plus Capt. Hal Williamson, United MEC Security Committee defensive tactics expert, spent a long day in late April getting some serious "mat time." The three ALPA representatives participated in a demonstration of the new, stream-

lined Crew Member Self-Defense Training (CMSDT) course offered by the Federal Air Marshal Service (FAMS) at the FAMS training facility in Atlantic City, N.J.

In December 2003, President Bush signed into law the Vision 100—Century of Aviation Reauthorization Act, which mandated, among other things, that the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) provide free, voluntary self-defense classes to flight and cabin crewmembers who want such training. The self-defense training is intended to go beyond the basic security training that airlines must provide to all flight and cabin crewmembers.

The TSA began nationwide deployment of the original CMSDT program on Dec. 7, 2004. The rollout took place in the five cities where the prototype was tested—Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, Miami, and Washington, D.C. Additional classes were added later at Atlanta, Denver, Philadelphia, Phoenix, and San Francisco.

The original course involved 24 hours of training during three consecutive days. About 85 percent of the training was hands-on "mat time."

"We didn't get the level of participation in the original course that we wanted," says Capt. Mike Keane (United), who has worked as a technical advisor to the FAMS since 2000. "Most pilots and flight attendants needed a day to travel to the course and a day to travel home, all on their own time, and that added up to five days of a crewmember's time off. So we've shortened the course to one day.

"To compensate for shortening the length of the onsite course," Capt. Keane continues, "we've developed a one-hour DVD and an illustrated training manual for crewmembers to study on their own before they show up for their hands-on mat time."

The DVD covers some important information in addition to the actual self-defense tactics:

- Vision 100 indemnifies anyone who acts reasonably to thwart a criminal act or an attempt at air piracy.
- Any use of force must be "reasonable, appropriate, and necessary"—and if you neutralize the threat, you must promptly end your response to it.
- Fatigue interferes with a person's ability to respond appropriately to a threat.

- The optimal heart rate for self-defense is 115–145 beats per minute. When your pulse exceeds that range, your fine motor skills are greatly diminished.

The defensive maneuvers—“move, block, and strike”—are based on gross motor skills and a person’s normal startle reflex to raise his or her fore-

but certainly will bring an attack to a swift conclusion.

After acquiring and practicing these basic techniques, CMSDT students learn how to defend against such weapons as knives. “Move, block, secure [the weapon], strike,” is the mantra. In a thrusting attack, you “hollow

“Nothing beats being able to go through the drills in the cabin sim.”

arms to protect the head and neck.

The DVD, the manual, and the mat time with instructors emphasize the fundamentals—defensive stance (“Never cross your legs or feet”), target areas of the body, personal weapons of the body, movement, blocks and covers (covers are defensive, but aggressive blocks can cause nerve dysfunction in an attacker’s arm).

Some of the tactics, such as stomping an attacker’s foot, are dirt-simple basic, but nonetheless effective. Learning how to put a wrist lock on an attacker to create “pain compliance” requires more finesse and some practice,

out”—i.e., quickly bend at the waist to pull your torso away from the line of attack while allowing the weapon to go in the original direction of thrust.

Along the way, students get astonishing lessons in the physiology of self-defense: To illustrate the true power and foundation of employing a distraction, such as kicking an attacker in the shins while grappling, one instructor told a student, “Hold your arm out in front of you. Make a fist. I’m going to try to push your arm down—you try to keep me from doing that.”

After the student successfully resisted the instructor’s downward force, the instructor said, “Good—now let’s try that again.” This time, the instructor started tapping lightly on the back of the student’s neck with his fingers. The student’s arm collapsed.

“I wasn’t doing anything to hurt your neck,” the instructor explained, “but the distraction diverted your attention away from making a maximum effort to hold up your arm.”

The FAMS instructors briefly reviewed objects found in airliner cabins that can be used as improvised weapons or, in some cases, as shields. As one instructor cautioned, however, “You can use these familiar objects against an attacker—and an attacker can use them against you.”

Perhaps the most sobering lesson of all comes late in the day, in the cabin mockups: It’s one thing to try to neutralize an attacker in the mat room, with plenty of space to maneuver—it’s quite another to engage an attacker in the tight confines of an airline cabin. But if you’re going to be prepared to hold your own in a physical fight in a 22-inch-wide airliner aisle, you better get into the cabin sim and get some hands-on experience.

F/O Graham said later of the new




Capt. Ed Folsom (United), his MEC’s Security Committee chairman, left, trains with the Committee’s defensive tactics expert, Capt. Hal Williamson.

CMSDT, “This course wasn’t intended to make you into someone who can take on five attackers in the parking lot. But it’s a good course. It can prepare you to slow down an attack, or stop it, until help arrives. It helps to build your confidence. It’s also aimed at piquing your interest. The fact that crewmembers can take the class again as often as they want to is really important.”

For crewmembers who have had tactical training, F/O Graham says, “Any mat time you can get is good—and it’s not always easy to find. Also, having someone to train with who can give you some resistance is important. And nothing beats being able to go through the drills in the cabin sim.”

Every flightcrew member and every flight attendant knows that their workplace remains a potentially dangerous place. Hard to believe, given airline passengers’ demonstrated readiness since 9/11 to come to the aid of crewmembers when needed, that disruptive-passenger attacks against crewmembers are on the rise again. But they are.

If you’re in the aluminum tube when the dark side of human behavior erupts, having had what the FAMS call the “inoculation” of CMSDT—training to deal with violence in a controlled environment—could make a big difference in the outcome.

For information on class locations and schedules, log on to ALPA’s members-only website, Crewroom.alpa.org, and click on the Safety/Security tab. 



F/O Scott Graham (United), the ALPA National Security Committee liaison to federal law enforcement agencies, right, blocks Chris Witkowski, Association of Flight Attendants’s director of air safety, health, and security.