Securing the Skies

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FEMA / ANDREA BOOHER

Where were you on the morning of Tuesday, September 11, 2001?

Time and distance dim most memories, but certain events are never to be forgotten. Almost all Americans of a certain age remember where they were and what they were doing when they learned of, say, the loss of the space shuttle *Challenger* or the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Most readers here likewise will be able to describe where they were and what they were doing 5 years ago when they heard about the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As with the *Challenger* accident and the Kennedy assassination, the ramifications of 9/11 were not obvious at the conclusion of that tragic encounter. But the days and years that followed have brought enormous changes to the airline industry and how it operates. Documenting all of them would require a hefty book treatment. Here, on the fifth anniversary of that heinous attack, we will highlight just a few of the more salient actions that ensued.

The first few days

After the initial reactions of shock and disbelief receded into the background, ALPA's offices erupted into a maelstrom of urgent activity. A quickly constituted Security Task Force headed by ALPA's first vice-president, Capt. Dennis Dolan, began pulling together resources from staff and pilot volunteers to organize and direct ALPA's actions. A conference room was commandeered to house a 24-hour command center, where pilots acted as a clearinghouse for incoming and outgoing information.

Not long after the attacks, ALPA's president, Capt. Duane Woerth, received a call from Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta, asking him to serve on one of two Rapid Response Teams that would focus on aircraft and airport security. This allowed ALPA to play an instrumental role in many of the ensuing security reforms.

One of the first orders of business for ALPA was to review and revise its positions on security. The old policies and practices were mostly based on the waves of hijackings in the 1970s and occasional "air rage" incidents. They clearly were no longer sufficient. Flimsy cockpit doors and security

Workers sift through the debris left behind by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center's twin towers.

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screening contracted out to lackadaisical low bidders could not provide adequate bulwarks against terrorism.

One of the first ALPA policies to go was an aversion to firearms in the cockpit. Before 9/11, the industry's "Common Strategy" protocols to deal with hijackings could be summarized as "accommodate, negotiate, do not escalate." The methodology worked. Most hijackings ended peacefully or with minimum violence. Introducing guns into the cockpit only ran the risk of unintended escalation. But with the advent of suicidal terrorists whose only goal was to smash the airplane into buildings, nothing was left to accommodate or to negotiate. The only option was to escalate the defense.

After evaluating many options, including nonlethal weapons, ALPA's Security Task Force concluded that the only viable defense against lethal force was lethal force. Exactly 2 weeks after 9/11, Woerth was testifying at a House Aviation Subcommittee hearing. Although he reiterated most of his recommendations from the Senate hearing held the previous week, he made one significant addition: a call for a program to train and arm airline pilots in the cockpit. The proposal faced stiff opposition from the White House, the Department of Transportation, and many members of Congress, not to mention a significant minority of members (including Canadian pilots) who were not comfortable with the concept.

ALPA persisted, and Congress eventually authorized the Federal Flight Deck Officer (FFDO) program. Although the bureaucracy introduced some onerous limitations and requirements, the basic outline of the program closely followed ALPA's recommendations. The exact numbers are classified; but today thousands of highly trained FFDO participants are acting as a deterrent to, and as the last line of defense against, terrorist attacks.

ALPA still in a lead role

While the FFDO proposal predictably captured the news media's attention, that was just the last layer of defense in a much-needed, thorough overhaul of security. For example, most cockpit doors could be breached with a solid kick or two. Pilots needed more substantial protection. ALPA, through its postion on the Rapid Response Team, took a leading role in hammering out technical requirements, which the FAA eventually refined and mandated.

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The industry/government Common Strategy protocols also were in desperate need of thorough revamping. Seeing that action wasn't forthcoming, ALPA leaped into the breach and began revising the rules and practices that would be required training for pilots, flight attendants, and various individuals on the ground to instruct them on how to react to developing situations. The FAA accepted ALPA's proposals and even acknowledged ALPA's leading role at a news conference announcing the new standards.

Echoing its earlier One Level of Safety campaign, ALPA immediately began calling for One Level of Security in air transport. While it was logical that passenger operations became the focus of security enhancements—after all, 19 *passenger* terrorists had carried out the attacks—security for cargo operations had been inexcusably neglected over the years. The Association began pushing for equivalent improvements to cargo operations and facilities. Since 9/11, a number of important changes have been imple-

mented, but cargo security issues are complicated by such factors as aircraft configuration, airport designs, and the concern that screening methods cannot be allowed to bring freight movement to a screeching halt. In mid-2006, the TSA issued a rule that addessed many (but not all) of ALPA's cargo security concerns.

ALPA supports other initiatives

Acting more in a supportive role, ALPA promoted many other improvements to security: The responsibility for airline security was removed from the FAA, whose real role is safety regulation, and given to the newly created Transportation Security Administration, which later was placed under the new Department of Homeland Security. TSA screeners replaced those from private contractors. Stricter rules for prohibited items were imposed. The new bureaucracies brought problems and controversies of their own; but overall, security was enhanced by these changes, and few would argue for a return to pre-9/11 security.

The Federal Air Marshal Service had been created to replace the ill-conceived Sky Marshal program of the 1970s, but by 2001, it had been allowed to wither to a few dozen agents. With vocal support from ALPA and others, the ranks of the FAMs were quickly increased.

With ALPA's support, Canada implemented a parallel service, the Aircraft Protective Officer Program, using Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Any rapid expansion of a program comes with attendant problems, some of which persist for both FAMs and FFDOs, but the combined prospects of a hijacker being confronted by armed federal agents and/or armed pilots thus far have acted as a deterrent to Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations. Despite terrorists' willingness to die in the process, they want a predictably high probability of success for their high-profile, elaborately conceived and executed atrocities.

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: ALPA's Security Task Force, chaired by Capt. Dolan (end of table), meets in September 2001; ALPA representatives visit the American Association of Airport Executives in summer 2002 to discuss AAAE's role as clearinghouse for criminal background checks of aviation industry employees; the first FFDO class trains in Glynco, Ga., in April 2003.

Success sometimes is measured by things that don't happen. The news media have devoted much sensationalistic coverage to the threat from shoulder-launched missiles (MANPADS), prompting a few congressional calls to install missile defense systems on all airliners at an estimated cost of more than $10 billion. An in-depth study by a working group from ALPA's National Security Committee and other safety representatives concluded that this is not the best option. With the encouragement of the Association, the DHS has taken a much more rational and measured approach by conducting extensive research and analysis. A preliminary news report at press time indicates that the DHS has come to similar conclusions.

Near and not-so-near misses

Not all of the changes (whether proposed or implemented) have been unalloyed successes. ALPA members should look briefly at some of the initiatives that were ill-conceived ("What were they thinking?"), that were poorly or only partially implemented, or that might best be described as "works in progress." The purpose is not to cast blame, but to learn from mistakes and reset the course lines that don't steer the Association to its targeted goals.

One of the loudest complaints about the government's reactions is that its security-policy pendulum keeps swinging between gross complacency and a hyperactive manic state in which proposals are generated with seeming disregard for their practicality or effectiveness.

The terrorists used box cutters? O.K.,

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we'll confiscate sewing scissors, nail files, and even pilots' tools. Search every luggage pocket and body cavity to make sure that no one brings these weapons of mass destruction onto our airplanes.

Well, we haven't had any box-cutter attacks, so we'll let them carry short-bladed cutting implements now—but no cigarette lighters! Can't have anyone flicking his Bic to ignite his shoes in flight.

Pilots and flight attendants have unfettered access to our airplanes? Okay, make them do the "passenger perp walk"—take off their shoes and belts like all the other suspects. Don't let them jumpseat. Oh? They can jumpseat now? Okay, make them present a ticket or boarding pass like the other passengers!

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In other words, the system has tended both to overreact and to go for the quick-and-easy "solutions," says Dolan. "Complex, expensive fixes that really do address problems face uphill battles all the way. Using technology to focus on what people are carrying is far easier than training and employing humans to interview passengers and look for known telltale signs of suspicious behavior.

"Politically and in terms of public relations, making everyone, including grandmothers, children, pilots, and flight attendants, do the security perp walk in front of the other passengers is easier than implementing and justifying a hierarchy of risk assessment that recognizes lower-risk categories and calibrates its security measures accordingly," Dolan explains.

If "know thine enemy" is an essential component of ALPA's battle against terrorism, then knowing who is not the enemy is equally important. The need for a secure, universally acceptable form of identification for airline and airport workers dates back to a fatal security event in 1987, after which ALPA proposed a "universal identification card" with encoded information about the bearer. The 9/11 attacks should have settled the question for everyone. "Smart card" technology, with identifying data embedded in a microchip, can provide secure, positive means to clear airline and airport employees through security checkpoints.

After some initially promising signs of interest, and inauguration of the "Registered Traveler" equivalent for passengers, the TSA inexplicably put this crucial program on the back burner. In May 2006, the agency gave signs that the pendulum may be swinging back toward further action, but it has not made any definite commitments yet. Canada already has implemented an equivalent system, the RAIC (Restricted Area Identification Card) but has not yet extended it to all of its airports.

Continuing in the "know thine enemy" vein, the TSA's attempt to upgrade the Computer-Assisted Passenger Prescreening System (CAPPS) was marred by overreach on its part. For unfathomable reasons, the TSA wanted to extend the use of CAPPS to criminal activities unrelated to security. This political blunder gave some validity to civil rights and privacy concerns that otherwise would have been baseless.

As a result, CAPPS 2 and its successor version have been kept on the shelf at a time when we should be using every means to look past the low-risk individuals and focus on those with potentially higher risk.

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Five years later

The legacy of the 9/11 attacks has been a mixed lot. Viewed overall, the record has been good.

"We undoubtedly are safer and more secure than we were on that day of infamy, when, as with Pearl Harbor, we were caught woefully unprepared and virtually undefended," says Capt. Bob Hesselbein (Northwest), chairman of ALPA's National Security Committe. "Armed with a combination of technical expertise, facts, and political clout, ALPA has instigated or helped to promote a wide array of improvements to our security network and has headed off or reduced the effect of numerous misguided proposals from Congress and the administrative agencies."

Many of ALPA's members still display on their flight bags the Association's 9/11 memorial decal with the words "Never Forget." Those two simple words are more than just a slogan. From now into the foreseeable future, they must be the prime directive, the very foundation of ALPA's continuing campaign to keep its members and their passengers secure against those who would do them harm.