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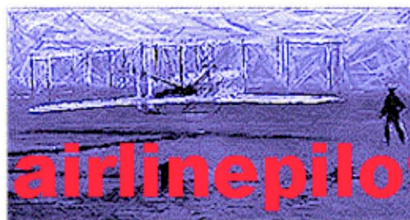
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Arm Our Pilots Now: Air Piracy Is Not Going Away

by Captain Mark Estabrook, September 11-16, 2001



The last layer of defense against terrorism rests here.

In order to immediately restore faith in our nation's air travel industry, it is time that the FAA Administrator and air carrier certificate holders authorize the immediate carriage of sidearms by all commercial airline pilots in the United States. Existing regulations permit such carriage (See [Title 14, Chapter 1, Subchapter F, Part 108](#)), and training should commence immediately.

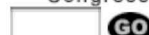
Long term, firearm safety courses could become permanent fixtures of commercial airline pilot training. Carriage of such weapons should be mandatory, as it is for police officers, Secret Service details, and sky marshals.

Critics will argue that an insane airline pilot might shoot someone.

Think about it. A maniacal pilot can manipulate the controls to crash into any target he wants at anytime, so why don't we trust him with a firearm? Others may argue that an armed pilot could have his weapon taken from him and used to commit the very act of air piracy that the carriage of such weapons would be designed to prevent, but I ask you, if you had been a passenger on board the American and United flights that crashed in Washington, D.C., New York City and Pennsylvania, would you have wanted your pilots to at least have had a fighting chance?

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Two brains
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Of course you would.

If national policy dictates it, the technology now exists for handguns to be "imprinted" with the identity of the owner, so that the pilot is the only one capable of discharging the weapon.

Over-penetration in a pressurized cabin is another significant issue. To combat this, many ammunition manufacturers produce a specialized frangible aluminum or plastic bullet that is designed to break up quickly on impact with solid objects. Since selected frangible rounds turn to dust with no ricochet and shoot more accurately than plated or jacketed bullets, pilots can safely put down hijackers in close quarters without penetrating our pressurized cabins.

Every time you board a plane, you put your faith and trust in that pilot. So why not trust him to protect the cockpit from hijackers? Although sky marshals have been used in passenger cabins in the past, they cannot absolutely protect the last layer of defense in any aircraft -- the pilots in the cockpit. In addition, who would protect cargo pilots who fly widebody aircraft all over the world if we were to simply rely on sky marshals? And as we have learned from the incidents at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, it doesn't matter who or what is on board a large airliner, the end result is the same.

Here are some other long term solutions for a comprehensive security net that must be constructed:

- Bulkheads must be redesigned in future aircraft production to preclude any forced entry -- either by mechanical or explosive penetration.
- Cockpit doors must be redesigned to replicate a bank vault in concept. Solid steel pins should seal the door on all sides. Crews must be trained that the cockpit door will not be opened under ANY circumstances, up to and including the execution of hostages in the cabin. The latter should be national policy -- thereby taking the decision out of the hands of the captain and relieving him or her of much of the psychological baggage that would necessarily go with such emergencies. Bathrooms should be installed in the cockpit, and food can be served to the crews prior to departure and ovens installed in the cockpit for convenience.
- [Armed air marshals](#) should be stationed as far forward as possible, in First Class, between the cockpit and the majority of passengers, or aft of the cockpit entry door on cargo carriers. Utilization of air marshals should be redefined from now on. Their deployment should primarily be to protect the pilots and the citizens on the ground, rather than for the exclusive use of passengers in the cabin. Therefore, all cargo carriers should utilize air marshals as well. The existing air marshal staff should be immediately supplemented with military and police SWAT team personnel after appropriate training at the air marshal school.
- Professional personnel earning professional wages must be used at airport security checkpoints. Extensive training in interdiction techniques and new technologies are inevitable, but low-paid, uneducated security personnel should be a thing of the past. Eventually, the federalization of the program will make the government responsible for our security screening.
- Deployment of better and more pervasive bomb sniffing technology can be accomplished on short order throughout our nation's airports, and sniffing of every bag, both checked and carryon, as well as every box shipped via cargo carriers, should be mandatory. Manual searches of every carryon bag should be accomplished.
- Cease and desist all attempts by the Federal government to "harmonize" FAA pilot licensure requirements and procedures with those of foreign governments. American citizens should be the only

ones certificated to carry passengers and cargo within our territory. Furthermore, government attempts to ease existing Cabotage Laws, laws which protect American air and maritime commerce for reasons of safety, economics, national defense and labor, should be abandoned. Combined with recent events is the Egypt Air incident, which should tell Americans who they want piloting U.S. routes.

- During World War II, the governments of the United States and Britain created "War Labor Boards" in an effort to unify the work force with the national agenda. Now is the time for our government to meet with airline labor unions on a daily or weekly basis in an effort to collect not only moral support, but suggestions for improvements in our national security net. In the same vein, airlines should suspend their corporate terrorism against their employees, and take the money they would otherwise distribute to union busting law firms and consultants, and reallocate that money to improving the security on our nation's airliners. American labor-management relations changed on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, and we need to put aside our differences to work through this national crisis.

A national commitment to change the way aircraft are constructed should be made. Existing fleets of aircraft should be retrofitted within a defined time period, such as 24-months.

But the last layer in our defensive shield should always be the armed pilots who sit at the flight controls. Identification of airline pilots authorized to carry weapons can be accomplished through fingerprint and retinal scanning technology and their access controlled at selected entry points.

It's in all of our best interests to take immediate steps to protect our national commerce and transportation system. Granted, investment in an aviation security revolution is expensive, but what is the cost of terrorist attacks on U.S. targets? What price do you put on the other national security targets that would make the World Trade Center pale in comparison?

Vice President Dick Cheney said on September 16th's "Meet the Press" that fighter pilots were given orders to shoot down commercial airliners headed for Washington, D.C..

"The president made the decision ... that if the plane would not divert, if they wouldn't pay any attention to instructions to move away from the city, as a last resort, our pilots were authorized to take them out," Cheney told viewers on the program.

"People say that's a horrendous decision to make, and it is," Cheney said. "As it turned out, we did not have to execute on that decision."

The possibility exists that a "flying combat air patrol" over Washington would be made permanent, but that decision would be up to the President, Cheney said.

What I hope and pray is that if the White House is willing to shoot down innocent civilian passengers and air crews to protect national assets, then perhaps they will be willing to immediately begin training and arming pilots so that the President will never again have to authorize such abhorrent defensive actions in the United States of America. Let's not be reactive in our national policy. Let's be proactive.

In the preparation for war, the waving of flags, the lighting of candles, the thoughtful and heartfelt prayers, the singing of patriotic songs... and yes, the fighter caps over Washington, mean little to a trained terrorist. He has one objective, and that is to penetrate our concentric circles of defense and destroy his target. Before we engage the enemy, we should make sure we have taken every precaution to defend our aviation system. Despite the Administration's intentions to root out all of the terrorist cells in the world, there is no doubt that another wave of retaliatory terrorism will follow such military actions.

Terrorism is not a place. It is a tactic. And within the extremist factions of Islam, it has been elevated to the level of a religion. American commando units will find many of the terrorist training camps and cells around the world already evacuated, and the terrorists will be on the move. Within the United States and Canada, the terrorist network is waiting.

And they will strike again.

We should immediately jettison our liberal anti-gun notions when it comes to the protection of thousands of people's lives. Let's commit our American ingenuity to revolutionizing our aircraft and airport security measures. Failure to do so will exact a continuing drain on our nation's resources, economy and most importantly, our humanity.

Captain Mark Estabrook is the editor of AirlinePilots.com. He has served in the United States Air Force as an E3 AWACS Aircraft Commander with duty in the Persian Gulf region during the Iran-Iraq war. He received a Master of Public Administration degree from the University of Oklahoma in 1987. Mark Estabrook currently serves as an Airbus captain at FedEx. Permission to reprint or publish "Arm Our Pilots: Air Piracy Is Not Going Away" through all media is automatically granted.



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