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Weapons on Aircraft and Aviation Security

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Abstract. This article presents Issues to consider in developing aviation security policy on the deployment and employment of weapons on aircraft by aircrew and air marshals.

Let's try a thought experiment. An aircraft in flight has an optimal intra-cabin and intra-cockpit weapons system. The system can identify the potential for security threats based on profiling systems. The system can calibrate the appropriate use of force based on the actual threat to security at any particular pointing time—i.e., an appropriate amount and type of force can be calculated based on a corresponding amount and type of threat. The system will employ force based on this calibration. Collateral damage—i.e., injury to innocents and damage to the aircraft and anything else that might come in contact with the aircraft—will not occur. With the deployment and employment of such a system, most aviation security experts would agree.

However, such a system does not exist. To some aviation security experts it could never exist. Instead, there are very serious disagreements among security experts about the very placement of weapons for security purposes aboard aircraft. It is to these disagreements that we now turn.

There are many rhetorical arguments against the deployment and employment of weapons within the cockpit. According to these arguments, the cockpit crew needs to attend to flying the aircraft and weapons responsibilities get in the way of this attention. Opposition to these arguments notes that security violators who succeed in entering the cockpit with lethal capability and motivation also can get in the way of the aircrew's attending to flying the aircraft—i.e., box cutters sticking into one's head or neck are negatively correlated with appropriately flying an aircraft. Other arguments against being against weapons in the cockpit as a security policy suggest that technology has led to a present state wherein much of flying does not entail the need for continuous attention.

Still other arguments (especially made by some in the law enforcement professions) against weapons on the aircraft suggest that the cockpit crew cannot be appropriately trained or are not of the right stuff for weapons employment. Inappropriate consequences of weapons employment such as innocents being injured or killed, the aircraft being irreparably damaged, or the weapons being taken away and employed by terrorists and by other security violators would become too likely. Arguments against these arguments note the military backgrounds of many aircrew personnel, empirical data suggesting that skills and judgment for appropriate weapons employment can be taught in a cost-effective manner, and that the cockpit crew already has control of a huge weapon—the aircraft—and, hopefully, are of at least the right stuff to be entrusted with life-and-death decisions.

Another set of arguments is based on an observation that few if any terrorist and hijacking events have been satisfactorily managed by aircrew—usually air marshals—with weapons. Arguments against these arguments note that aircrew who are not air marshals have rarely had the opportunity to possess weapons to engage security violators. Moreover, some arguments note that even if there are no sufficiently documented cases of air marshals successfully managing security incidents through the

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necessary use of their weapons, the public policy of weapons-toting air marshals on aircraft may well have a deterrent or at least a complicating effect on some would-be security violators.

Most aviation security experts believe that if weapons on the aircraft become some part of an overall security posture, a key to maximizing success will be unpredictability. Unpredictability should comprise successfully masking whether procedures will be equal, equitable, or even absent on some or all aircraft—e.g., number and physical placement of air marshals, number and types of weapons within cockpits, and rules of engagement. Against reconnaissance, surveillance, and research capabilities of sophisticated terrorist networks, however, maintaining perceptions of unpredictability will be difficult.

Another key to maximizing success seems to be that aircrew who may employ weapons need to be screened for gross psychopathology (nothing more refined is available on a satisfactorily predictive basis by competent psychological authorities), trained and evaluated in realistic air scenarios, and be integrated within the logistics of how weapons will be stored and transported to and from the aircraft.

One further key to maximizing success involves the selection, training, and management of air marshals. Public discourse on these subjects suggest better choices need to be made in making work schedules compatible with human psychophysiology and personal and social needs, establishing awards and decorations programs for high performers, developing accountability based on performance—even in the very difficult context wherein there are very, very few and relevant security incidents per population of flights, and establishing a psychological contract wherein expectations of personnel are defined, met, and, if necessary, changed in an environment of benign interchange and respect.

Making weapons deployment and employment mandatory or voluntary is an issue that need not be decided—especially publicly. Not deciding will contribute to unpredictability.

In any case, there are True Believers on all sides of the weapons on aircraft Issue. And there will continue to be. (See Boyd, C. (2001). HRM in the airline industry: Strategies and outcomes. *Personnel Review*, 30, 438-453; Glover, G.D. (2000). Unrecognized effects of downsizing: The psychological contract and United States Air Force captains. *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities & Social Sciences*, 60(9-A), 3521; Naff, K.C., & Thompson, R.C. (2000). The impact of teams on the climate for diversity in government: The FAA experience. *FAA Office of Aviation Medicine Reports*. DOT-FAA-AM-00-27; Pickel, K. L., French, T. A., & Betts, J. M. (2003). A cross-modal weapon focus effect: The influence of a weapon's presence on memory for auditory information. *Memory*, 11, 277-292; Storm, W. F., & Hapenny, J. D. (1976). Mission-crew fatigue during rivet joint operations. *USAF School of Aerospace Medicine Technical Report*. No 76-36 5.)

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