

Changing Attitudes Toward In-flight Violence and Developing Workable Solutions

- Michael Sheffer

There is an old saying that goes: "It's a lot easier to let the cat out of the bag, than to try and put it back in". In recent months, incidents of passenger disruption and violence aboard commercial aircraft have received extraordinary attention in newspapers, television, and other media outlets. A number of high profile accounts have fueled public and industry interest, and have level air carriers, law enforcement, and governments scrambling for answers and solutions.

Through decades of inaction, indifference, or denial, the subject has been allowed to claw it's way through, and appears to be running rampant throughout the industry on a global scale. indeed, the feline has escaped. As we address this issue today, let us devote our efforts not toward containment, but rather a commitment to skinning this particular animal, once and for all.

I believe there exists a unique opportunity, at this point in time for changing both passenger and industry attitudes toward this growing threat to aviation safety. Air Carriers have exhibited an increased sensitivity to the issue, and through the efforts of many individuals and professional organizations, an increased awareness of the problem has emerged.

I hope that our efforts today will be regarded as a watershed event in this developing saga. I believe that we stand upon an excellent site where we can begin to build a foundation for an industry wide renaissance in exactly how we react to the occasional disruptive passenger, how to provide flight crews with the necessary tools which will prepare them for such an eventuality, and most importantly, how best to prevent incidents from occurring in the first place.

I became aware of the problem passenger dilemma when I heard of an incident which occurred in Savanna, Georgia. Passenger Gary Lougee, had gone berserk in a drunken rage aboard a domestic US flight. Not long after that sobering incident, I became aware of another case involving two individuals, Susan Callihan, and Thomas Kasper. They were the couple who tried to force their way into the flight deck, and seriously burned a Flight Attendant with hot, steaming coffee, in Los Angeles. Both cases resulted in convictions on federal charges, and prison sentences for all three.

On the evening of December 16th 1997, I had just put our two small children, to bed, and was catching up on some work, when the telephone rang. My wife Renee was away from home on a four day trip. She was leaving Los Angeles, bound for Baltimore, and was to remain overnight in Boston. As I answered the phone, I was surprised to hear the voice of one of Renee's crewmembers. She informed me that Renee had been injured and had been taken to a hospital by ambulance.

My first reaction was that she must have been hurt in turbulence. At that point, I didn't know just how turbulent her flight had become. The news that she had been injured by one of her passengers left me dumb struck, and in shock.

After speaking with her crewmate, I called the airline's overnight desk, as Renee had previously instructed me to do in an emergency. I was dismayed to learn that they had no knowledge of the incident. I couldn't understand this apparent lack of internal communication. I suppose that my expectations got the best of me, in that I presumed that the airline would have a contingency plan to react to such a situation. To my dismay, it became apparent that such a program did not exist.

People react in different ways to a frustrating situation. Some break down in hysterics, others become angry, still others throw up their hands and simply give in to exasperation. While these reactions may provide an emotional release, and may temporarily relieve tension, it does nothing to solve the problem that one is facing. I decided to vent my frustrations in a manner that would result in some positive changes being made. I wasn't sure how I would accomplish this task, but it soon became clear that I possessed a key which has opened a whole new world to me.

When Renee returned home the next day, we decided to devote ourselves to an effort to make some sort of sense out of it all. We concluded that the best thing to do was to begin to work toward developing solutions for ourselves, and for possible future victims. I promised her that I was going to "do something" about all of this.

I had recently become an Internet user where I work, and had been provided with a personal Email account, I soon learned how to utilize this powerful asset, and rely heavily upon it to this day. The Internet can be a great equalizer, where ideas can be readily exchanged, and information can flow freely at blazing speed, all around the world. A small idea germinated, and took root in a message addressed to my elected representatives.

To my surprise, I received a very positive response from my Congressional Representative; Susan Myrick. In fact, she followed up her Email response with a personal telephone call to determine the extent of Renee's injuries, and to ask me what I thought should be done to curtail such behavior.

I must admit that I was unprepared to answer her questions, but soon afterward, I returned to the Internet to do some research. As I browsed, I came across one account after another of Flight Attendants being assaulted and abused. I soon had compiled a notebook full of pages from the net, and my personal distaste for this type of uncalled for behavior grew into the organization which is now known as SKYRAGE.

It occurred to me that the aviation training community would be fertile ground to explore for solutions. By chance, I came across the CRM Developer's Discussion Group. This Internet forum allows Crew Resource Management Professionals from around the world to exchange ideas in regard to aviation industry related topics. Unknowingly, I had stumbled upon a wealth of information and individuals who were willing to assist me. These extraordinary people took me "under their wing" so to speak, and helped educate me in the science which underlies and supports the safe operation of the aviation industry.

I owe the CRM professional community a debt that I cannot readily repay, other than to ensure that my efforts are worthy of their investment in me. Through the contacts established within the CRM Developer's Group, we have been fortunate to be invited to speak before the International Symposium on Aviation Psychology, Canadian Regional Airlines, and this gathering of The Royal Aeronautical Society's Human Factors Group.

There are countless individuals who deserve recognition for their faith in us, and for their tireless efforts on our behalf. In particular, I would like to thank Rick Heybroek, not only for being the motivating force behind this gathering, but also for taking the time to help educate me on the inner workings of this complex industry.

After a period, I had an established "network" of aviation professionals that I could communicate with. The list has now grown to include pilots, flight attendants, psychologists, trainers, operations, and managers. The Email was flying, and the ideas generated by this activity had reached a point where I was able to compile it into a complete document. You will find the result of that effort in the package before you.

I felt that with these ideas, I had discovered an answer to Representative Myrick's question, as to what needed to be done, and I submitted my findings to her office. Upon her review of the proposal, I was gratified by her positive response. Representative Myrick and her staff have become a very strong and influential ally in Washington, and we have encouraged others to form similar relationships with their Representatives. As a result, a larger grassroots campaign has developed. The document has undergone several revisions and additions over the months, but retains its original focus. I hope to see many of these proposals become part of an effective program with which to reduce passenger outbursts to the level that domestic US hijackings have fallen.

Encouraged by this experience, I have attempted to inform others in government, law enforcement, aviation, and the general flying public. The SKYRAGE web site was conceived as another means to distribute the message that this type of crime should no longer be tolerated. We have also started exploring other endeavors. We have developed an unofficial association with members of the Airline Pilot's Association, The Institute of Alcohol Studies in the UK, have initiated a dialogue with the United States Justice Department, and have helped establish a training program for passengers to keep them "Rageproof".

In 1996, the Federal Aviation Administration published advisory circular 120-65 - "Interference With Crewmembers In The Performance Of Their Duties". The advisory mentions the use of posted notices in airports in hopes of reducing incidents through information. After several failed attempts to convince airport managers and air carriers in the United States to enact such measures, SKYRAGE decided to take the initiative on its own, and began in early 1999 to lay the groundwork for a Public Service Announcement campaign.

We hope to raise the public's awareness through a series of advertisements in airport facilities. Two such notices have now been posted in Miami, and Charlotte. The response has been extremely positive, and we expect to post

an entire series of such messages, as the resources for doing so become available.

The issue of the disruptive passenger has existed as long as commercial aviation itself. One reported case is dated as far back as 1950,(i) where a drunken passenger assaulted the crew on a flight out of Alaska. In years previous, crews were reluctant to file complaints, either due to a perceived fear of retribution from their employer, or a distaste for the involved paperwork and possible legal proceedings. Air carriers were loath to file charges, or even acknowledge that such incidents occurred. Possibly due to a fear of negative press, or reduced revenue, such events have been quietly dismissed, or simply ignored. In one case, an intoxicated foreign national assaulted a crewmember, kicking her in the spine, and causing serious injury. Since the assailant resided in a foreign country, and was perceived to benefit from diplomatic immunity, it was determined that the case would be too difficult to prosecute. Furthermore, the crewmember was subjected to any number of indignities by her own airline as she sought assistance with her injuries, and rehabilitation. In short, she was left feeling as though she had committed the offense.(2) This example might serve to set the stage for a litany of events in which disruptive passengers have been allowed to abuse crewmembers for years.

By reinforcing negative behavior and by portraying the travel experience in an unrealistic light, the airlines themselves may have fed into the vicious circle of passenger disruption. Marketing campaigns have for years, given the impression of a luxurious, relaxing encounter. The expectations of passengers who look forward to such treatment evaporate as soon as they enter a crowded terminal. By the time they reach their assigned seat, what was supposed to have been a wonderfully enjoyable experience has mutated into exasperation. Intoxicated passengers have been boarded by harried gate agents to relieve themselves of the problem, and to avoid the repercussions of a delayed departure. Loudly complaining, and even disruptive passengers have been pacified with upgrades, frequent flyer miles, and other perks, to quiet their outbursts, or to avoid losing a potential source of future revenue. In one incident, a disruptive passenger's unruly behavior forced a Trans Atlantic flight to divert. Just weeks following the incident, the airline sent him a renewed, frequent flyer¹ valued customer identification card. (3) Rewarding bad behavior shows people that if they act up, they will be given special treatment. In my opinion, it would be far more productive to reward passengers who go out of their way to be polite, or helpful. By generating an atmosphere of positive reinforcement, we might soon experience a departure from such selfish conduct.

Underreporting of incidents has long been the norm. The simple fact that such documentation was not required by federal authorities has left an enormous gap for researchers to fill. Accessing the Federal Aviation Administration Database of Incident Reports, I was able to discover 204 accounts from the years, 1978 to 1998.(4) While these figures do represent the fact that the problem has existed for decades, they show the extraordinary lack of such information with which to formulate educated opinions. Other researchers have discovered 283 FAA documented incidents for the year 1998. In the same year, 84 US carriers transported 614 million passengers on countless

commercial flights, and anecdotal reports reveal that a single US airline reported 635 incidents of disruptive behavior. David Fuscus, vice president of communications at America's Air Transport Association, believes there are at least 5,000 acts of passenger misconduct every year. (5)

If the FAA records revealed only 283 incidents occurring on all 84 US carriers in 1998, and my efforts produced less than that number for a 20 year period, it would be reasonable to believe that such a serious discrepancy is in need of repair. In answer to the growing need for more information, government agencies within both the US and UK are now assembling a factual database on events. It is hoped that by year's end, the first preliminary data will be released, allowing a deeper investigation of how and why such events develop.

Passenger satisfaction with airline service has been rated at an all time low in recent months. The number of passenger complaints per 100,000 passenger boardings was 26 percent higher in 1998 than the year before. Fliers filed 1,175 complaints about airlines with the Department of Transportation in January 1999, some 87 percent more than a year earlier, and more than double the number of complaints in December. j6) Consumers filed 2,111 complaints against US carriers in the month of July. An additional 374 complaints were lodged against foreign carriers, tour operators, travel agents and others. The 2,485 overall complaints in July nearly doubled the June total of 1,332 and marked the highest number since March 1988, according to US Department of Transportation figures. j7)

Last year, not one person lost their life in an aviation related accident. instead of praising the industry for the safest annual report in years, it appears that passenger attitude has shifted to a demand for more comfort, and better service from an industry that is growing at an unprecedented rate. The industry is experiencing tremendous pressure to satisfy this increasing demand. Air traffic control infrastructure, designed in a time where such growth was unimagined, has simply not kept pace. Airports are becoming clogged by the increase, and according to at least one US airline CEO, the industry is rapidly approaching gridlock.

Projected figures from the FAA place worldwide passenger emplanements at nearly 1 billion by the year 2009.j8) Sources within the Airline Pilot's Association estimate roughly 3 percent of airline passengers account for disruptive incidents ranging from simple verbal abuse to actual physical violence. By the year 2009, just ten years from now, the sobering figure might add up to approximately 300,000 annual events of passenger disruption if allowed to continue unchecked.

Major aircraft manufacturers are now debating the feasibility of developing even larger aircraft, capable of carrying hundreds more passengers. Imagine the staggering effects that disruptive behavior might impose on such large numbers of people on a single flight. If we do not soon address the passenger disruption issue, and develop workable solutions today, what will the situation be like in the coming years? My greatest fear is that a future incident escalates into an unwanted tragedy. With this in mind, let us resolve to do our part, to the best of our abilities.

First of all, let us consider passenger disruption on a global scale. Social, economic, and even geographic boundaries impose no limits upon which passengers might become unruly. To be sure, cultural interpretations of social class have been noted as one aspect in such incidents. An example of class distinction causing problems in the air would be found in the case of the Middle Eastern Princess who struck a Flight Attendant for not bringing drinks fast enough, j2) To answer this, we must remain diligent in the representation of air carrier operations as a totally different environment than what passengers might expect to find on the ground. A recent article aptly named this environment as a positive safety pressure. j9) If we can stress safety as the primary concern during each and every flight in unprecedented fashion, passengers might begin to understand the requirements for compliant behavior. No longer can the aircraft cabin be viewed as some sort of flying public house or restaurant. Cabin Crewmembers are not food service workers, nor are they bartenders. The Flight Attendant's primary concern is for the safety of passengers throughout each and every flight. By reinforcing the image of safety professional, passenger respect and consideration for cabin crews would undoubtedly increase. Cabin service is a factor in how passengers choose an airline, and performance by cabin crews should continue to be held to high standards. Future revenues indeed rely upon cabin service as a major selling point, but the delineation between service and safety must be clearly defined. Otherwise, the archaic image of the flight attendant as some sort of waiter or hostess will continue to degrade their position of responsibility.

International travelers who become disruptive pose the most serious questions in regard to being held accountable for their behavior. I received the personal account of a passenger who witnessed a US National's appalling behavior on a flight from Hong Kong to San Francisco last month. His misdeeds left many passengers fearing for their lives. When the crew was asked whether action would be taken, the response was that the crew didn't feel as though they had the authority to press charges on foreign soil. Furthermore, the local police stated that they did not have the federal authority to detain the passenger. The result was that the passenger walked away without any action whatsoever being taken.

Just as the Tokyo Convention of 1963 grants international authority to aircraft commanders for keeping good order onboard, I feel it is important to focus upon developing an International accord in regard to disruptive incidents. Individual nations have begun their own domestic initiatives which might serve to pave the way for such agreements. In the United Kingdom, the recent revision to the Air Navigation Order, and stiffer penalties for convicted disruptive offer a glimpse of the changing attitude within legislative bodies across the world.

The United States Senate is now debating how best to apply proposed measures that would provide special jurisdiction to local law enforcement to act as Federal Marshals in disruptive incidents. They are also discussing tougher penalties, and fines for those found guilty.

While these examples are indeed notable, they simply do not begin to address the global nature of the problem. Individual governments have every right to enact legislation to protect commerce within their own boundaries, but

such measures leave the door open for differing interpretations of domestic law. It would seem prudent that a uniform agreement on the definitions of disruptive behavior would insure prosecution when acts of air rage cross national boundaries

Closer to home are measures which individual air carriers may enact of their own accord. Recently, we have witnessed a sea change in the overall attitude taken by air carriers world wide in acknowledging the problem. In the past three years, several high profile conventions by industry groups such as The Airline Pilot's Association, and The International Cabin Crew Association, have addressed the issue, and a multitude of theories abound as to what the causes for such outbursts might be.

While the pundits point their fingers at this trend or that observation, it is interesting to note one obvious measure that we can apply, starting today The recurring theme that poses the best result in the least amount of time would be to develop training methods for airline personnel to effectively deal with the disruptive passenger. The other side of this coin is to develop an effective means of educating the flying public as to what kind of behavior will not be tolerated.

To their credit, many air carriers have instituted such training measures. Conflict resolution and diffusion skills, situational awareness, and passenger profiling and other well documented measures, might prove to be an effective means for reducing incidents. On the extreme side, actual physical restraint instruction is another possibility. The downside of restraint, as any professional will acknowledge, is that such drastic measures are seldom easy to administer in the best of circumstance, and the likelihood of crewmember injury is much greater when restraint is applied. The popular "Yellow Card" system has it's benefits as well, but when improperly administered, it can serve as a catalyst to increase aggression on the part of the passenger, (io) 1 believe that a firm resolve on the part of air carriers to keep problem passengers off the aircraft in the first place is the best policy. Our involvement with the CRM developers of Canadian Regional Airlines helped to reinforce my belief in a policy based upon these principles.

The Canadian Regional program has already proven itself with several situations being resolved before they had the chance to become violent. Training is by far the best defense against such offensive behavior. The role of the CRM Facilitator in regard to disruptive passengers cannot be overlooked. It is through the application of CRM procedures and methods that crewmembers will be given the tools that they are in dire need of these days.

A program which relies upon teamwork, communication, planning, and the proper application of these measures will undoubtedly resolve most issues before they become disruptive or violent. By instilling this knowledge through a rigorous program of instruction, crewmembers will be able to approach future incidents in a professional and confident manner, and retain the upper hand in dealing with such unwarranted behavior.

Addressing passenger education is where the SKYRAGE Foundation has carved it's own niche'. As a television broadcast professional, 1 understand very well the role that the media can play in developing awareness on a grand scale, and have been able to utilize this resource with excellent results. With

national media attention in the United States, Canada, Australia, Germany, and the UK, we have endeavored to pass along the message that disruptive behavior is a serious crime, as well as a dangerous threat to aviation safety. Additionally, the growing popularity of the SKYRAGE web site gives timely access to recent news reports, and other helpful information on the subject.

The SKYRAGE Public Service Announcement Billboards have met with positive response, and we hope to be able to continue to provide passengers with these subtle reminders to control their behavior. Working with private consultants, psychologists, and training professionals, we have developed a focused training program for passengers called RageProofing, where we offer a professionally designed course on how air travelers can avoid the potential disruptive passenger, and learn techniques which can help them remain in control of their behavior.

The course also instructs passengers on safety procedures and the rules and regulations which apply to airline passengers. Facilitators for the course are carefully selected, Flight Attendant Instructors. The group of instructors we have assembled have one very special thing in common. They are all victims of a violent passengers outburst. We felt that by allowing these very special individuals the opportunity to play an active role, the course would leave an indelible impression in the minds of the attendees, and empower the victim's recovery through a hands on contribution in reducing future incidents.

On behalf of Renee, I would like to thank you very much for allowing us in your midst. I hope that we have been able to impart a bit of the determination that we feel toward resolving this issue, and we stand ready to offer whatever assistance we can. I truly believe that we have a unique opportunity to begin to reverse this dangerous trend, and I look forward to a safer and violence free environment for both passengers and cabin crew in the future.

(f) Dealing With Air Rage - Peter T. Reiss - ICAO Journal f2Æ8

(2) ICCA Conference on Unruly Passengers - Stockholm - f998

(3) ITV World in Action - Bad Air Days - September f998

(4) FAA Incident Data System - <http://nasdac.faa.gov/laspv/fic/fids.asp>

(5) Flying in the Age of Rage - Elliott Hester - Salon Magazine September f999 http://mrvw.trip.com/completetroveler/article/0,1355,1-4-3_2154,00.html

(6) MSNBC - 4/1/99 - Peter Greenberg - <http://www.msnbc.com/news/E4Ö8Ö0>

(7) IEEE Newsletter 09/30/99 - <http://www.ieetravelonline.org/newsletter/>

(8) FAA - Projections fir Figures for Future Passenger Traffic

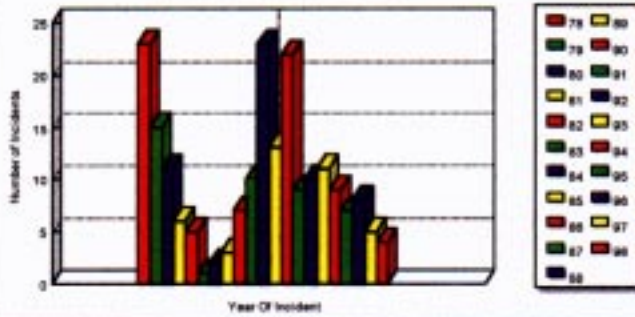
(9) Journal of the British Air Line Pilots Association - Bill Lucas - April/14ay fg99

(f0) ASRS Passenger Misconduct Reports # 570f - 07xx/f999

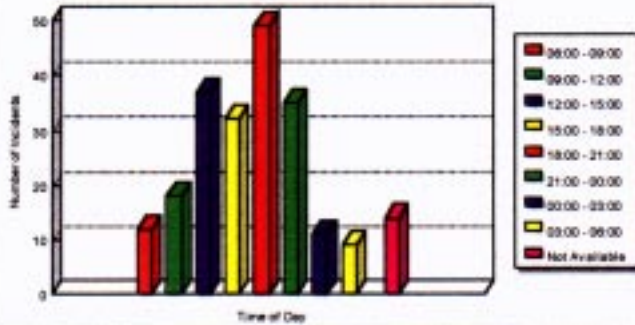
FAA Documented Incidents 1978 - 1998



FAA Recorded Incidents 1978 - 1998



FAA Recorded Incidents 1978 - 1998



FAA Documented Aircraft Type 1978 - 1998

