Air safety is a state of mind

By Patrick Smith  | August 31, 2006

FLYING IS DANGEROUS. That's heresy coming from a pilot, but I admit there's nothing inherently safe when you're high above the earth, going hundreds of miles per hour in a pressurized tube atop tons of explosive fuel. While it doesn't violate physics, it does violate common sense. As a senior captain once said to me one morning over the Atlantic, with a wink that was only partly ironic: "We have no business being up here."

Yet, in a testament to our skills and imagination, we have turned this fundamentally hazardous endeavor into the safest, most reliable mass transport ever devised. Normally I'm not one for statistics, as it's the pilot's crutch to toss the squeamish flyer a bone of abstract minutiae, but each day around the world about 5.5 million passengers take to the air on scheduled flights, virtually all of them landing safely.

In the United States alone, around 25,000 commercial flights operate daily. Sunday's accident involving a Comair regional jet was a tragedy, but our record for the past five years has been unprecedented. There has not been a large-scale crash on North American soil since that of American Airlines flight 587 in 2001 -- our safest stretch since the advent of the jetliner. Globally, data show that flying is about five times safer than it was a quarter century ago, with twice as many airplanes carrying twice as many people. Raw crash totals are up, but they are down considerably as a percentage of total flights.

That ought to make us comfortable, but it doesn't, owing chiefly to those visceral contradictions that flying so neatly presents. How safe we are, and how safe we feel, are very different things -- a reality that is warmly human, frustratingly illogical, and ripe for exploitation.

Enter the terrorist.

Word emerged earlier this month that a London-based conspiracy intended to blow up US jetliners using hard-to-detect liquid explosives. The news ignited chaos at airports everywhere. Within hours, authorities threw down a gauntlet of tight security restrictions --
most notably an indefinite ban on liquids in carry-on luggage. Overcome by skittishness, flyers touched off a plague of false alarms: planes being diverted, fighter jets scrambled, “suspicious" travelers removed in handcuffs.

Our reaction was outlandish and self-defeating, moving quickly from a state of reasonable anxiety to one of hysteria, and in the process giving terrorists exactly what they want. Our mindset, addled by the fireballs of Sept. 11 and a five-year obsession with terrorism, is distressingly irrational.

For example, an Al Qaeda plot based on stealthy liquid explosives was uncovered in 1995. If confiscating commonplace personal items makes us safer, why wasn't it done 11 years ago? Because it doesn't make us safer. In 1995 we were calm enough to accept that the real job of security belongs to intelligence and law enforcement professionals, not airport screeners. We are free to ban everything from pencils to chewing gum; there will remain limitless ways to smuggle dangerous, undetectable items onto aircraft. That's not capitulation. What's going on at airports this month is capitulation.

Ironically, attacks against planes over the past several years have been far fewer than during the '60, '70s, and '80s -- an era rife with violent skyjackings and murderous bombings. Not to sound defeatist, but air crimes have been with us since the invention of the propeller, and never will be stopped entirely. Neither will the occasional accident. Every now and then, a plane is going to crash. The threats and challenges we face, including those emanating from the minds of fanatics, are basically the ones we've always faced -- and we've done pretty well.

Meanwhile, the realities of safety aren't the only thing obscured by fear. Routinely ignored are the remarkable opportunities brought on by the global expansion of commercial aviation. Despite soaring petroleum costs, airfares hover near historic lows, while ultralong-range aircraft now connect previously unimaginable distances. Journeys that once took months in a sailing ship are commonplace nonstops, for sale at pennies per mile.

Seldom do we celebrate this, fixating instead on the specter of terrorists, and on false assumptions of danger. Human nature sits at the heart of this tendency, but maybe that's not a good enough excuse. We should be stronger, smarter. Then, we might even enjoy flying again.

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