



AIR MARSHAL PROGRAM UNDER LENS AFTER PASSENGER SHOT

December 12, 2005

Air marshals, undercover federal agents who patrol airplanes, are coming under new scrutiny after two shot and killed an unarmed passenger who claimed he had a bomb last week.

The air marshals shot and killed Rigoberto Alpizar, a U.S. citizen traveling on an American Airlines flight from Colombia that landed in Miami on Dec. 7.

According to the marshals, Alpizar, who was wearing a backpack on the front of his body, said he was carrying a bomb. He left the plane and entered the boarding bridge between the parked aircraft and the airport gate, refusing to drop to the ground and appearing to reach into his bag.

Witnesses said Alpizar's wife, Anne Buechner, tried to explain that he was bipolar, a mental illness also known as manic-depression, and was off his medication. Some passengers said Alpizar appeared agitated before he got on the plane.

“Based on their training they had to take the appropriate action to defuse the situation to prevent a danger to themselves and also passengers in the terminal,” said Dave Adams, a spokesman for the Federal Air Marshal Service.

No explosives were found on the aircraft. Alpizar's backpack, which authorities blew up at a safe distance, also contained no explosives. The two air marshals involved, who remain publicly unidentified, were placed on paid leave, a standard practice, according to the air marshal service.

Who are air marshals?

Although air marshals have been around since 1968, their numbers were boosted following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

After 9/11, the number of air marshals went from around 30 to several thousand. The Transportation Security Administration won't say how many are currently working, but the TSA does say the service received more than 200,000 applications “overnight.”

Many air marshals come from a law enforcement background.

Deployed undercover and never alone on flights around the world, air marshals are supposed to detect, deter and defeat hostile acts that target U.S. airplanes, airports, passengers and crews, according to the air marshal service Web site.

Held to a higher standard for handgun accuracy than any other federal law enforcement officers, air marshals are trained to shoot to kill, not maim or injure, if they think there is an imminent threat.

“The bottom line is, we’re trained to shoot to stop the threat,” John Amat, vice president of the Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association, told the Associated Press.

The shooting in Miami was the first time since the Sept. 11 attacks that a marshal had fired a weapon while on duty.

Are air marshals trained properly?

Air marshals must attend a training course in Atlantic City, N.J. They study behavioral observation, intimidation tactics and how to use self-defense in close quarters, such as an airplane.

No serious questions have been raised about the actions of the air marshals who killed the passenger last week.

“From what we know, the team of air marshals acted in a way that is consistent with the training that they have received,” White House press secretary Scott McClellan told reporters.

However, some aviation safety experts question the kind of training that air marshals receive, especially as it has undergone such rapid changes since Sept. 11.

“There’s a lot of stuff that they really never had the time to think through, so they’re always trying to tweak it. When you do that, it can cause confusion, morale problems, and some people lose faith in the system,” Rich Gritta, an aviation expert at the University of Portland in Oregon, told the Christian Science Monitor.

Recent air travel changes

Air safety experts also worry that two recent airline changes could also impact air marshal training: the decision to soon allow passengers to carry certain sharp items like scissors aboard planes, since cockpit doors are now reinforced, and rising incidents of unruly passengers and air rage.

“If somebody shows up with a knife and is going to stab a flight attendant or start stabbing themselves, do we shoot them?” said Andrew Thomas, an aviation security expert at the University of Akron in Ohio.

Others believe that the recent shooting will actually be more reassuring than disturbing to the traveling public.

“This is a reminder they are there and are protecting the passengers and that it is a seriously deadly business,” David Stempler, president of the Air Travelers Association, told the Associated Press.

--Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra
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