



FLIGHT-WATCH



VOLUME 206

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JULY 2009

INFORMATION BULLETIN

From: Alan Armstrong
To: The General Aviation Community
Date: July 22, 2009
Re: Office of Inspector General's Report on TSA's Plans for General Aviation Security

**OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL DECLARES:
 "...GENERAL AVIATION PRESENTS ONLY LIMITED
 AND MOSTLY HYPOTHETICAL THREATS TO SECURITY."**

**I.
 INTRODUCTION**

On May 27, 2009, Richard L. Skinner, Inspector General of the Department of Homeland Security released his report entitled *"The TSA's Role in General Aviation Security."* The report was made at the request of Representative Sheila Jackson Lee, Chairwoman of the Subcommittee on Transportation Security and Infrastructure Protection, House Committee on Homeland Security. The reason for the investigation by the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) was described as follows:

Our objectives were to identify Transportation Security

Administration security requirements for general aviation reports, threats to general aviation, measures taken to secure general aviation, steps nonfederal stakeholders have taken to enhance the security of general aviation, and any "incidents of concern" with security at general aviation airports. In addition, we evaluated allegations of security vulnerabilities at three Houston-area general aviation airports. These allegations were represented in an investigative report by a local television station.

The report noted that general aviation aircraft are operated alongside large commercial aircraft at more than 5,000 public use airports throughout the United States. The OIG noted: "General aviation accounts for 77% of all flights in the United States and is a vital component of the national economy. It includes the very large air cargo transport sector, air medical-ambulance operations, flight schools, corporate aviation, and privately owned aircraft."

The OIG noted that after September 11, 2001, the Aviation and Transportation Security Act of 2001 (Public law 107-71) was enacted which gave TSA the responsibility for

security of all modes of transportation in the United States. Subsequent to the passage of the Act, the TSA assumed operational responsibility for passenger and baggage screening and regulatory responsibility for air cargo and airport security. The report noted that the TSA coordinates with FAA, the intelligence community, and law enforcement in analyzing and assessing potential threats to national security.

II. GENERAL AVIATION LIST STUDIES

The OIG observed that general aviation operations occur at 19,000 airports and helipads, only about one-third of which are available for public use. Many general aviation flights range from short distance flights in a single engine light aircraft to long distance international flights in private jets. Also, general aviation is employed for emergency aeromedical helicopter operations as well as air ship displays at sporting events. The OIG noted that frequently, general aviation operations are on demand rather than operating on a routine scheduled basis.

The OIG noted a November 2004 review, *General Aviation: Increased Federal Oversight is Needed, But Continued Partnership with Private Sector is Critical to Long-Term Success* (GAO-05-144) in which the Government Accountability Office (GAO) concluded: "...the small size, lack of fuel capacity, and minimal destructive power of most general avia-

tion aircraft make them unattractive to terrorists, and thereby, reduce the possibility of threat associated with their misuse." The OIG noted: "The GAO recommended that TSA develop a plan for implementing a risk management approach to strengthen GA security, and that the FAA establish a documented process to review and revalidate flight restrictions. TSA and FAA generally concurred with the GAO's recommendations."

The OIG declared that a device weighing 1,300 pounds was involved in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. The OIG also noted that this degree of weight could not be carried aboard for example, a Cessna 172 Skyhawk, one of the most popular airplanes used by flight schools. According to the OIG, a January 2008 report by the Congressional Research Service declared "that as a platform for conventional explosives, the threat posed by a light GA aircraft is relatively small compared to the threat posed by trucks.

The OIG noted that in March of 2008, the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association issued its own report and noted that the GAO had observed: "that most GA aircraft could not penetrate the concrete containment vessel of a nuclear power plant, release radiation through explosion, or otherwise severely damage a nuclear power plant."

III.
A NEWS STORY BY A HOUSTON
TELEVISION STATION

The request by Chairwoman Lee for an OIG study came on the heels of a news story that aired in Houston, Texas purportedly identifying “security breaches” at three local airports. The OIG declared that “Houston is not a ‘sitting duck for terrorism’.” The OIG commented that to the extent the news reporters believed they had identified “security breaches,” they were not aware of the fact that they were under 24 hour video surveillance, the aircraft had been locked or disabled, and fuel access had been denied.

The OIG also wrote that the airports in the Houston area accommodate more than 440,000 aircraft take-offs and landings per year and operate 24 hours per day 7 days a week. The sheer volume of activity at the airport “would appear to limit opportunities for unobserved loading or movement of aircraft,” according to the OIG report. The OIG noted that there was 24 hour surveillance at the David Wayne Hooks Airport and that the jet the reporters approached could not have been moved “without security personnel noticing them tampering with the jet.”

With regard to Sugarlands Regional Airport, the OIG noted that to the extent the news reporters observed that there was not fencing around the entire perimeter of the airport, the area without fencing was swamp infested with venomous

snakes and crocodiles and that the vulnerability of the airport did not depend upon whether someone could touch the aircraft.

With regard to the expedition of the television reporters at the Lone Star Executive Airport, they did not realize that their presence on the airport had been noted by the TSA and the local police. It appears the OIG report was prompted, at least in part, by the expedition of the television news reporting crew in Houston claiming that there were vulnerabilities in local airports.

IV.
THREAT ASSESSMENTS OF
CHICAGO, LOS ANGELES
AND TETERBORO

The OIG also assessed the vulnerability of Chicago (ORD), Los Angeles (LAX) and Teterboro (TEB). With regard to Chicago, only 3% of the aircraft at ORD were transient aircraft. Signature Flight Support was the only FBO on the airport, and there was no flight school. Essentially, ORD is and was an airport employed by scheduled air carriers.

Traffic at LAX was found to consist of about 2% transient GA aircraft with minimal general aviation operations. There were two FBO’s at the airport and no flight schools. The OIG also noted that “There have been no incidents of concern [at LAX].”

With regard to Teterboro, the OIG noted: “It has five FBO’s and no flight schools. Officials have not identified any major security threats, and there have been no security-related incidents of concern.”

V.
**A THREAT-BASED ASSESSMENT
APPROACH TO GENERAL
AVIATION SECURITY**

The OIG declared: “TSA analyzes credible intelligence information to determine and prioritize the existing threats. The Office of Intelligence (OI), which has primary responsibility for assessing potential terrorist threats, has conducted an extensive evaluation of threats that would affect or involve the GA industry.” According to the report, the Office of Intelligence has identified several organizations that have shown an interest in using general aviation aircraft to obtain flight training or launch attacks and it continues to monitor reports of their activity. The Office of Intelligence also continues to assess how aircraft might be used to launch an attack.

The OIG report contained the following in terms of the capacity of a general aviation aircraft to inflict substantial damage:

Although OI has identified potential threats, it has concluded that most GA aircraft are too light to inflict significant damage, and has not identified specific imminent

threats from GA aircraft. OI has also concluded that there is no credible threat of crop-dusting aircraft being used to spread chemical or biological agents. However, OI noted that various intelligence sources have identified helicopters as aircraft of ongoing interest to terrorists. OI also stated that the potential for a terrorist group to use GA aircraft to conduct an attack remains a possibility that cannot be ignored.

The OIG also noted that the TSA has the authority to direct the FAA “to immediately suspend, revoke, or refuse to issue licenses to pilots who pose a national security threat.”

VI.
CONCLUSION

The Office of the Inspector General of the Department of Homeland Security has written a sobering report confirming what members of the aviation community knew, that is, that general aviation does not represent a threat to national security. In fact, the bottom line of the OIG report is set forth below in a single paragraph:

We determined that General Aviation presents only limited and mostly hypothetical threats to security. We also determined that the steps general aviation

airport owners and managers have taken to enhance security are positive and effective. Transportation Security Administration guidelines, communication forums, and alert mechanisms, coupled with voluntary measures taken by the owners and operators of aircraft and facilities, provide baseline security for aircraft based at general aviation sites. Significant regulation of the industry would require considerable federal funding. We are not making any recommendations to the Transportation Security Administration regarding general aviation regulations. The Transportation Security Administration reviewed our report and submitted many helpful technical corrections, but chose not to submit formal comments that would have been appended to this report.

As of the writing of this article, HR 2200 has been passed by the House requiring that TSA security directives remain in place for only six months before the TSA must demonstrate by way of a Notice of Proposed Rule Making that there is a credible threat to national security. Further, HR 3093 has been introduced to require the TSA to enter into negotiated rule making to satisfy the concerns of the general aviation community. It remains to be seen how HR 2200 will be received in the United States Senate. While the climate with TSA appears to be improving, the struggle is far from over.



Homeland Security

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