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Maintaining Security at General Aviation Airports

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If you take a side trip to your nearby general aviation (GA) airport, you are likely to see little if any visual evidence of the security precautions so palpable at the big airports from which most of us travel.

At larger GA airports in the United States you may see fences around the airport perimeters with card-controlled access gates, lots of security signs and the occasional security vehicle, but at smaller airports it may appear that there is no security at all.

Appearances are deceiving

Appearances can be, and in this case are, deceiving. In fact the FAA, Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and the general aviation community — led by the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA) — have banded together to make sure, as far as possible, that no one will use a general aviation airplane as a weapon.

To begin with, GA airplanes make poor weapons. They are too small, and are unable to cause significant damage. According to AOPA, more than 70 percent have six seats or less, and most have only one engine. Put in perspective, the typical GA airplane weighs less than a Honda Civic and carries even less payload.

The Airport Watch project

AOPA, which counts about 70 percent of U.S. pilots as members, has implemented a program called Airport Watch. Modeled after neighborhood watch programs, Airport Watch increases the awareness of some 700,000 pilots and airport workers to be alert to unusual or suspicious activities and offers a toll-free TSA number to call if they observe something amiss.

Airport Watch also takes advantage of the simple fact that most people at a local airport know one another, just as we know the neighbors in our community. Outsiders are quickly recognized and unusual behavior really stands out.

Lock it up!

GA airplanes, even older ones, are worth a lot of money. The more capable airplanes that might tempt a terrorist are of greater probable interest to drug runners. These airplanes are often additionally hobbled with throttle locks that prevent movement of the throttle and security

chains around propellers.

Buying an airplane causes more scrutiny these days. The U.S. Treasury Department has implemented guidelines intended to flag suspicious sales such as all-cash transactions, payments by a third party or cases where the customer's identity is unclear.

Flight school initiatives

Additional steps by the federal government have increased GA security with respect to both charter and flight school operations. Passengers who charter larger aircraft are subject to security measures similar to those applied to the airlines. Hijacking is considered unlikely since the pilots know in advance who they are flying.

Flight schools, including freelance flight instructors, have attracted particular attention. A TSA training program called Flight School Security Awareness is required of active flight and ground instructors, whether they are employed by a flight school or independent. FSSA training must also be taken by school employees who have direct contact with flight students. There is both initial and annual recurrent training to make sure that, once trained, people stay trained.

Training brings attention to security-related incidents, measures, and procedures that affect the airport and/or flight school. A key component of FSSA training is a review of the Airport Watch program. This includes warning signs for airports, informational literature, and training videotapes to educate pilots and airport employees as to how the security of their airports and aircraft can be enhanced. For instance, access to aircraft keys has been greatly tightened.

You just can't walk through the door any more and rent an airplane. You have to show government-issued identification. In addition, if you are a U.S. citizen you must have an endorsement in your logbook indicating that your citizenship documents have been reviewed by an instructor.

Foreign students

Because the U.S. is graced with the largest and most active general aviation community and infrastructure in the world, pilot trainees from all over the globe go there for training. However, trainees must attend an FAA-approved flight school and their identities must be verified by the TSA before they are granted visas. Further, the TSA must approve every certificate or rating for which a foreign national applies as he or she earns a basic pilot license and then proceeds to more advanced education.

For example, a federal requirement mandates the U.S. Department of Justice to conduct a comprehensive background check for all non-U.S. citizens seeking flight training in larger aircraft weighing more than 12,500 pounds (generally turboprops or jets with more than eight seats).

Having a license from your home country does not get you around these rules. Since July 2002, background checks are required for individuals seeking a U.S. pilot certificate based on a foreign license.

Despite the fact that the U.S. government has determined that GA is not a significant terrorist

threat, it would be foolhardy not to take appropriate precautions. On its own initiative and in concert with the government, GA is doing its part to ensure the safety of the United States.

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