

Armed pilots? This needs to be asked?

by

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I was watching some talking-head program the other night when the question of arming pilots came up. This generated about ten minutes of breathless discussion. That was about nine minutes and fifty-eight seconds more than was necessary - even if you take a breath or two before answering.

Let's walk through this one, though, so that the folks on NPR and the new Phil Donahue Show can understand it.

“Can we trust pilots with handguns?” seems to be the main concern.

In the pointy end of every airliner there are at least two pilots. These individuals started their training in airplanes that probably weighed less than an old VW Beetle and couldn't go as fast. There, they learned the basics of flying. Push the stick forward and the houses get bigger. Pull the stick back and they get smaller until the plane stalls. Then, the houses get bigger again - fast.

Once they earned their private pilot's license, they continued the long climb to something called an airline transport rating. Along the way, they earned a raft of other licenses and ratings attesting to the fact that they could, regularly, make the number of their landings and takeoffs roughly equal. All of this required several thousand hours in the air and provided them with something called "experience" which is the ability to recognize mistakes when you make them again.

Some paid for all of this out of their own pockets. Others went into the military and flew aircraft designed to heave the human body through the sky at speeds that'd make your eyes water.

All in all, these individuals repeatedly demonstrated that they were healthy, attentive, persistent, intelligent, competent, able to do several things at once (See: aviate, navigate, communicate, talk, gawk and squawk), had remarkable situational awareness, were problem solvers, and always wanted to get their passengers safely to their destination. (Note: A small component of that last desire is generated by the fact that whatever happens to the plane, happens to them first.)

Because of all of the above, I believe we can assume - perhaps naively - that pilots could be trained and trusted to properly use a handgun in time of need.

“What about a bullet from that gun causing the plane to crash?”

We need to remember that commercial airliners are rather - to coin a phrase - sturdily built. Watch some old WWII clips of planes like the B-17. Fifty years ago, they regularly

made it home while resembling a piece of Swiss cheese. You might have also seen a recent television documentary on the design and construction of the Boeing 777. It was impressive. You had to really go out of your way to break one. Further, There are numerous stories about commercial airliners that've absorbed in-flight explosions and made it home. In short, airliners are designed to survive lightning strikes, bird strikes, hail, extreme turbulence, and whatever else they might find in the sky. A bullet from, say, a 9mm Glock is not likely to destroy such an aircraft.

“What if a passenger is hit by a stray bullet?”

OK. It all comes down to mathematics. Right now, there are a flock of jet fighters scattered throughout the country that can be scrambled on a moment's notice. Slung under their wings are some particularly nasty beasts designed to sniff out other airplanes and turn them into an aluminum shower in one quick hurry.

There should also be no doubt that the fighter pilot hauling all that ordnance is well trained and remembers 9/11. If he knows an airliner is being flown by some wacked-out wing nut who believes there are seventy two virgins awaiting him just the other side of the Sears Tower, he will not hesitate to drop that airliner well on this side of the tower. That pilot would have to swallow hard, but it'd get done. Do the math. One hundred or so in the plane or several thousand in the building? An armed pilot or a heat-seeking missile?

“We'll stop the terrorists before they get to the cockpit.”

Does anyone believe that terrorists will never get past our newly federalized, highly professional, high school diploma not required, screeners (motto: "See no profile, speak no profile, do no profile, grope that girl.")? I'll let you decide that one. As to terrorists being unable to get past the cockpit door, I'll bet I could find ten Hollywood screenwriters who could come up with a plausible scenario for that happening.

“Why not use stun guns instead?”

Think thick clothes. Think single shot. Think what happens after the first bad guy goes down and the next four or five keep coming? Not a pretty scenario, is it?

So, with the above as background, think of this as an interview. Here's the question.

“As an absolute last line of defense, should we arm airline pilots?”

Deep breath. (One second.)

“Absodamnedlutely.” (Two seconds.)

Now, Phil, what do we do with the next nine minutes and fifty eight seconds?