



CONNECTING THE DOTS IS ANTI-TERRORISM CENTER'S MISSION

News / Airlines



They might be called crisis managers, but as much as anything, the job of the people clustered in the windowless room filled with big-screen TVs and computers is to see if the **dots connect**.

A man carrying a gun gets caught trying to board a plane in Houston. A woman with a gun is stopped in the Atlanta airport. Both had tickets to fly into Washington's Reagan National Airport at about the same time. Coincidence, or a terrorist plot?

A gunman starts shooting at Los Angeles International Airport. Is he acting alone, or has an armed accomplice already slipped through security to board a plane?

A woman with connections to terrorists, but not enough to make the no-fly list, is on a plane from Qatar to Brussels. Is she a tourist, a courier or a threat?

"Even if [an incident] is routine, we want to make sure nothing is going on systemwide," says Rod Allison, TSA's assistant administrator for law enforcement, here in TSOC's conference room. (Nikki Kahn/The Washington Post)

Were it not for the tall chain-link fence and post-9/11 steel barriers that pop up to block drivers until they're cleared by the armed guards, the bland low-slung building in Northern Virginia would look just like any other in the suburban melange of office buildings and warehouses.

It hardly looks like one of the epicenters of the global effort against terrorism. But a stark monument just inside the doors of the Transportation Security Operations Center (TSOC) is a reminder of what the place is all about.

A twisted steel beam from New York's World Trade Center. Rubble from a shattered Pentagon. A fragment of metal from United Airlines Flight 93 that crashed near Shanksville, Pa., after passengers rushed the 9/11 hijackers.

Beyond that, through a card-key-coded door, the dimly lit center unfolds. It's staffed 24-7 by people from nine federal agencies, including the Transportation Security Administration, FBI, Secret Service, Federal Aviation Administration, Coast Guard, Customs and Border Protection and the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD).

The job of those who sit at close to 200 computers grouped in task-specific pods across the floor is to monitor the 8,000 flights in the air above the United States at any given moment, watch for border incursions by land and sea, and track what's happening at airports, railway stations, bus depots, highways and every other means by which people get from place to place.

The 13 people on average who carry guns into airports each day get reported here. So do those who show up at airport checkpoints with bottles of liquid larger than the 3.4-ounce limit. In one corner of the room, a team monitors cyberattacks on the TSA computer system.

Three huge radar displays play on giant wall-mounted screens, capable of zooming in to see Washington's airspace or some other city's, and then zooming out to capture a region or the entire nation. At least two dozen other screens display other data or all of the network news programs.

The goal of all the agencies in the room is to share information and coordinate action, connecting the dots or determining there is no meaningful link between them.

"We want to know, is that same [type of] thing happening in Las Vegas, or Washington, D.C., or San Antonio?" said Rod Allison, TSA's assistant administrator for law enforcement and director of the Federal Air Marshal Service. "Even if [an incident] is routine, we want to make sure nothing is going on systemwide."

People in the TSOC received about 7,800 reports a week from operatives in the field about a wide variety of movements and incidents, about 70 percent of them involving aviation.

Then there are days when a transportation crisis hits, such as a gyrocopter landing in front of the U.S. Capitol in April or the 2013 shooting of a TSA security officer at the Los Angeles airport.

When that happens, the TSA administrator appoints a crisis manager, and six top agency coordinators and their staff file through a doorway into an enormous conference room.

The middle console of a conference table that seats 24 people rises to present each manager with a computer screen, and staff members monitor computers that line the wall. The TSA administrator is linked in by live video from his seventh-floor conference room several miles away at TSA headquarters in Arlington, and a second live feed is piped in from the scene of the incident.

An example came on Christmas 2009, when Allison picked up the TSOC phone to hear a report of a pilot whose plane had smoke in the cabin as he prepared to land a flight from Amsterdam in Detroit.

“The next report came in and it said it sounded like fireworks were going off in the back of the plane,” Allison recalled.

By the time the flight reached the gate to be greeted by police, the responsible party had been subdued and his name, which appeared on the passenger manifest, had been run through the TSOC computer.

“That’s when he verbalized that he had a bomb,” Allison said.

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, then 23, came to be known as the “Underwear Bomber.” He had plastic explosives hidden in his underwear. When al-Qaeda-trained Abdulmutallab tried to trigger the bomb there were popping sounds and his pants caught fire, but the anticipated explosion never happened.

Only after flight attendants used fire extinguishers to put out the blaze and took Abdulmutallab to the front of the plane did he reveal he was carrying a bomb.

Working with the FAA representative at TSOC, the best available information was put out to every commercial aircraft in the air, mindful of the fact than on 9/11, terrorists struck four different planes on the same day, in a coordinated attack.

“We provided some instruction as to what they should do, meaning telling everybody to stay in their seats and putting on the seat-belt signs,” Allison said.

Smoke in a cabin isn’t an everyday occurrence in-flight, but Allison said it happens often enough, and even at its most innocuous, smoke needs to be reported to TSOC.

“That’s why you’ve got to get all these things reported, because something as unusual as smoke in the cabin turned out to be an attack,” he said. “You can’t just dismiss these things.”

25 OCTOBER 2015

SOURCE: THE WASHINGTON POST

ARTICLE LINK:

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