Flight Blight

Air rage isn't limited to 'crazy' passengers.

BOOKS

What Goes Around

Anger in the Air: Combating the Air Rage Phenomenon
Hunter, Joyce A. Farnham, Surrey, England, and Burlington, Vermont, U.S.: Ashgate, 2009. 238 pp. References.

On Aug. 25, 2009, "a 'disturbed man' on board a Qantas flight from London Heathrow tried to open an emergency exit door as the aircraft approached Sydney [New South Wales, Australia]," a report in the London *Daily Mail* said. "Terrified travelers watched as the man is said to have lunged for the door in the middle of the economy seating area, before cabin crew were able to restrain him. The airline, which confirmed there had been an unruly passenger, denied the man had reached the door, but a passenger on board the 747 jet claimed he grabbed the handle and tried to turn it."

It would have been physically impossible for the man to open the door with the cabin pressurized. Nevertheless, the need to forcibly restrain a passenger probably left the flight attendants emotionally shaken, and could have resulted in their being injured. The incident happened shortly before the approach and landing, critical phases of flight. Had they been needed in an emergency, the cabin crewmembers might have been in less than optimal condition.

"Air rage has already left airline [flight] attendants with stab wounds, bruises, internal bleeding, torn kneecaps and a broken back and neck," Hunter says.

Despite airliner cockpit doors being hardened since 9/11, air rage still poses a flight safety risk — as well as a risk to flight attendants and passengers.

Anger in the Air examines the forces that have led to what Hunter believes is a dysfunctional air travel system that creates psychological and emotional pressures on passengers as well as airline employees. The sources of pervasive stress, Hunter says, are airline policies toward customers and toward their own personnel, as well as passengers' psychological problems.

Perhaps the single most important lesson here is that air rage behavior is not limited to the occasional psychotic person who boards. Sometimes even "normal" people can act in ways that their self-control would otherwise prevent.

This is a disturbing book, partly from accounts of so many air rage incidents, each seemingly more bizarre than the last. Of course, they are sampled from millions of flights, and the chance of encountering a serious incident on any given flight is slim. Still, the reader who doubts that air rage incidents are an ever-present danger is likely to be convinced otherwise.

More alarming than the descriptions of passengers losing control, however, is the conclusion that is hard to avoid: Rage is partly a product of conditions in the airline industry.

Hunter quotes airline consultant Michael Boyd: "What airlines must understand is that this is not some external societal problem that has now spilled onto the departure concourse. It is essentially a situation that is partially — indeed, predominantly — within the airlines' control."

But what is sometimes forgotten about passengers' discomforts and privations is that the stress does not begin with boarding. Airport stressors also get on everyone's nerves. The sight and sound of crowds, the distances between terminals, the repetitive security warnings on the loudspeaker, and the attention-seeking design of stores and restaurants take a toll on whatever peace of mind the traveler began the journey with.
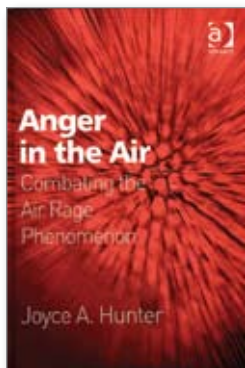
Even in the waiting area at the gate, once past the dreaded security screening, television monitors with restless images and dozens of people talking on mobile phones make it hard to relax. Throw extra waiting time for a delayed flight into the mix, and by the time the passenger finally struggles into a cabin seat, he or she may be primed with annoyance and frustration.

Fliers, especially those who remember air travel in its calmer days, can be shocked by the sometimes rude or impersonal behavior of airline employees. Undoubtedly most employees would like to be pleasant and helpful, and many are. But, Hunter says, "If customer complaints are any measure, airline personnel are suffering from a bit of air rage themselves."

An airline flight attendant is quoted saying, "Far too many of America's airline employees are shell shocked, depressed, disillusioned and resentful. In effect, we're now an industry full of employees going through post-traumatic stress and wondering why we ever thought it was fun. And that, in a nutshell, equates to bad and insensitive service with a 'who cares' attitude."

Hunter says, "Customers want to feel valued, employees want to feel valued — and airline management wants to drive profits. Airlines often act as if these were mutually exclusive goals, as if the only way to make a profit were to demean and undervalue their staff."

Employees also have to enforce airlines' rules. "They are the ones on the front lines where painful policies meet angry passengers, where a harried mother finds out it will cost an extra $50 to take her child's baby seat on the plane or when the family delayed by a snowstorm finds out their seats have been given away because they've arrived two minutes past an arbitrary deadline," Hunter says.

If passengers and airline personnel feel aggrieved for their own reasons, they are tempted to take it out on each other, having no other target available. If they do, the feedback loop contributes more tension.

"We do know that the upward spiral of hostility between employees and passengers can erupt into sabotage," Hunter says. She cites a reporter who wrote that "some rogue ground personnel are known to take revenge on passengers who have inconvenienced them by mis-tagging their luggage so it gets sent to the wrong city, reseating them by the bathroom or in a worst-case scenario, getting them kicked off their flights."

As in any population, a small percentage of passengers suffer from a mental disorder that would cause them to act inappropriately or dangerously regardless of how they are treated. But many people who express air rage would be considered normal — under normal conditions.

Some are taking medications that can have unusual effects in the cabin-air pressure equivalent to 8,000 ft altitude. The smokers experience nicotine withdrawal symptoms for hours. Some passengers are afraid of flying under the best of conditions, let alone in bad weather or turbulence, and anxiety can make even a reasonable or regulatory-based request from a flight attendant seem threatening.

Hunter says that partial oxygen deprivation is a factor in some air rage episodes. "To work properly, our brains need a certain amount of usable oxygen in our bloodstreams," she says. "Unfortunately altitude, alcohol, smoking and toxic chemicals all reduce that oxygen level … . The symptoms of hypoxia range from headaches, nausea, thirst, irritability, rage, sexual excitability and loss of judgment and control to, at the extreme, seizures, paralysis, coma and death." Other complaints about cabin air are said to be traceable to heated oil and hydraulic fluid fumes leaking into the cabin.

Then there is the issue of alcohol served to passengers.

"Most air rage stories start, 'When a flight attendant refused to serve him more liquor … ,'" Hunter says. "At least 40 percent of all air rage incidents are the result of a passenger getting drunk." A fairly typical incident was described as follows: "In March 2005, a 35-year-old man was heard swearing as he stumbled onto a flight from Denver to Anchorage, and the pilot notified him that he would not be served any more alcohol during the flight. When the flight attendant later refused to give him a drink, he

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went on a rampage through the plane, urinating on the floors and breaking trays."

The lower air pressure of the cabin magnifies the effect of alcohol. So does the lack of food on many flights. So does the combination of alcohol with drugs, including legal prescription or over-the-counter medicines.

Why not just refuse to serve alcohol on planes? Most people who have studied the issue believe that would be trading one set of problems for another. Columnist and pilot Patrick Smith, quoted by Hunter, says, "It seems an easy call: Lock away the liquor and episodes of airborne assault are cut by nine-tenths. Except it's never so simple. In the absence of alcohol, a portion of those predisposed to belligerence will find other excuses to rant, rave and break things."

It also seems unfair, and another potential contributor to air rage, to deny the majority of well-behaved, responsible passengers a drink or two.

"The first step towards preventing air rage is realizing that there are three different types of offenders, and we need a different approach for each," Hunter says. The most common type of air rage is from passengers who explode in anger because of perceived bad service. Though rude and upsetting to cabin crewmembers, they are not in the same category as "disruptive" and "unruly" passengers whose acting out goes beyond the verbal. The third category of offender, and fortunately the rarest, consists of "deranged passengers who are incapable of knowing what they're doing because they're blind drunk, on drugs or psychotic."

She believes most of the air rage in the first category could be reduced by better customer service. She says, "To reduce the most common forms of air rage, airlines need to (a) create a happier atmosphere on board by improving the 'tangibles' of the flying experience like crowding and lateness; (b) reduce the sense of cynicism and anonymity among passengers; (c) give passengers realistic expectations of their flight quality and a clear picture of the good behavior that is expected of them on board; (d) prevent intractable ragers from boarding airplanes in the first place and (e) hire, train and support high quality front line employees so they can prevent problems, foster a

positive customer experience, defuse rage and, if all else fails, subdue offenders."

She says the kind of airline employees who are best at benevolent crowd control "communicate well, listening, asking questions and seeking clarification, providing information and remaining sensitive to people's need to understand what's going on."

That makes sense; unfortunately, it is a picture of the ambience of the airline industry 50 years ago, before mass air travel and price competition. It seems unlikely that the industry can restore that kind of relationship between airlines and customers unless the structure and assumptions of the business change radically.

There is no mystery about the causes of air rage. The mystery is why industry management, employee associations and passenger groups do not get together to change the air travel experience. Taking into account the direct and indirect costs of air rage to airlines — diverted flights, employee physical and emotional injury, lawsuits, and turnover in personnel who just can't take it any longer — it might even be cost-effective.

— *Rick Darby*

WEB SITES

A Specialized Reporting System

Aviation Safety Communiqué (SAFECOM),
<www.safecom.gov>

Aviation Safety Communiqué (SAFECOM) is a voluntary reporting system, similar to the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space

Administration Aviation Safety Reporting System, for agencies of the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) and the U.S. Forest Service. "SAFECOMS are an accident prevention tool for everyone associated with DOI and U.S. Forest Service aviation operations," says the Web site.

Government personnel and contract vendors report aviation mishaps as they occur using the SAFECOM system. Reporting categories include incidents, hazards, maintenance and airspace. Data submitted on reporting forms are added to the SAFECOM database to share information about problems that could cause — and solutions that could prevent — aviation-related accidents or incidents.

The searchable database allows users to search by event or mission details; aircraft type (airplane or helicopter); model and manufacturer; description of occurrence; and more. Search results link to full-text SAFECOM reports containing complete information on events, including mission details, narrative of the mishap and corrective action undertaken or recommended.

The Web site and safety alerts about the system emphasize that "the SAFECOM system is *not* intended for initiating punitive actions. Submitting a SAFECOM is *not* a substitute for 'on the spot' correction(s) to a safety concern. It is a tool used to identify, document, track and correct safety-related issues. A SAFECOM *does not* replace the requirement for initiating an accident or incident report."

— Patricia Setze

Resources for Charters

Air Charter Safety Foundation, <www.acsf.aero>

The Air Charter Safety Foundation (ACSF), a member-supported safety organization, says, "The ACSF vision is to continuously enhance the safety and security practices of charter and shared aircraft owners and operators in the United States and worldwide."

At its 2009 symposium, ACSF announced its "Top 10 Safety Action Items" for the current year. The first three action items — implementation of safety management systems (SMSs), industry use of risk assessment tools and addressing the risks of unstabilized approaches — were highlighted in symposium sessions. Select presentations from this safety symposium may be viewed online or downloaded at no cost. Presentations include "SMS Implementation," by William R. Voss, Flight Safety Foundation (FSF) president and CEO, and "Safety Consequences of Unstable Approaches," by James M. Burin, FSF director of technical programs.

The organization has made a considerable amount of information available to non-members at no cost through its Web site. The resource page identifies SMS guidance materials available from the International Civil Aviation Organization and the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), articles on various SMS topics and presentations from the FAA-industry SMS focus group. Most of the resources listed contain Internet links to free, full-text documents.

Articles from ACSF newsletters and other resources contain information of interest for members and non-members. Most articles include Internet links to additional resources in full-text, such as FAA and other original-source documents.

ACSF says it developed the Industry Audit Standard "to set the standard for the independent evaluation of an air charter operator's and/or shared ownership company's safety and regulatory compliance." Integral audit documents — the "Operator Standards Manual" originally released in 2008; subsequent updates; appendix A, containing standards with guidance; and appendix B, a regulatory cross-reference index — may be read online or downloaded at no cost.

Owners and operators governed by U.S. Federal Aviation Regulations Part 135 and Part 91K have free access to the AVSiS Aviation Safety Information System software program "that collects detailed safety event data for analysis, response deployment and success measurement, and provides a tool for accounting for the cost savings realized by interventions," ACSF says.

— Patricia Setze