General Aviation Security

Flying Training Issue
Where Are the Women?

Focusing on security and safety issues within general aviation.

Online edition

Flight Training, GA Security & Trends in Both
By Jason Blair

"The Sky's the Limit" for Future Pilots
By Betsey Sanpere

Re-Thinking Pre-Check By Joe Corrao

Flight Training, GA Security, and Trends in Both

By Jason Blair, DPE, CFII
Past Executive Director of the National Association of Flight Instructors

It has been more than a decade since 9/11, and there is no doubt that general aviation has changed since then. That date is a marker in our collective history in aviation security, but it is also a marker in aviation training.

> *"We are now issuing just 56% of the number of certificates that we did a mere 20 years ago. "*

Since that watershed date, security practices in flight training at many airports have changed. At airports that have air carrier operations, most employees of training providers now must have airport badges, escort customers and passengers, and when working with non-US citizens, help them go through fingerprinting and background check procedures. Even at non-air carrier airports, security has been enhanced to limit access to areas, especially at airports in urban environments.

Security procedures have added complexity and additional hurdles to training, more so for foreign nationals in the United States, but certainly for others at work in the US aviation community as well. Over this time period we have continued to see decreasing numbers of pilot certificates issued each year. Going back to 1990 there were 156,955 certificates issued, in 2001 only 108,000 were issued, and in the most recent year for which numbers are available, 2011, we saw only 89,211 certificates issued. We are now issuing just 56% of the number of certificates that we did a mere 20 years ago. Flight instructor certificates have seen similar reduction, with 7071 issued in 1990, 5071 issued in 2001, but now only 4097 issued in 2011. We see similar trends in all pilot certificates.

But new certificates are not the only area we see reductions. We see similar reductions in the numbers of active pilot certificates. As pilots age and we certificate fewer pilots each year, our overall pilot population goes down. Some will try to say that these reductions are partially the cause of increased security burdens, but I doubt that is the case. Our changes in security procedures for flight training and for pilots in general are just a piece of the process by which we attempt to fill our pilot pool or keep active pilots engaged.

There are many other factors at play, including, but not limited to, fuel prices, insurance prices, airport access, availability of rental aircraft, and alternative hobbies that compete for our time. Interestingly, and while it is somewhat anecdotal to the numerical equivalents, each reduction that we see in pilot activity (especially in the GA community), causes a reduction in the services that are required. If we as a community use less avgas, the avgas companies will make less, causing its price to go up based on economies of scale. If we train fewer pilots, aircraft publishers sell less of their products and, in turn have to choose if it is worth continuing new product development. The reality is that as our pilot population is reduced, the potential target

V-tail Bonanza taxis for takeoff.

market for an industry becomes less attractive and profitable.

Interestingly, the less active we are, I think we also become less secure. Traditional general aviation activity has kept our airports secure through community awareness. Pilots were engaged with the activities at their local airports. The local "coffee and donuts group" on Saturday morning knew everyone at the airport. If a strange vehicle drove out on the ramp on a Tuesday afternoon while they were tinkering in their hangar, they wandered over and said "hello". This allowed them to evaluate the person. With fewer people at the airport on any given day, we have had to replace this local familiarity and self-policing with security fences and gated access for badged and checked users. It meets the same security effectiveness, but it certainly has a different feel. Potentially interested parties who might have just stopped by in the past are now kept out by these more active security measures. It's possible that this affects our ability to get new potential pilots through our gates.

We need security at our airports. It has to be there to keep those out who would cause harm, and in some cases, to keep us safer (keeping our aircraft secure keeps them safe from unintended damage also). But we do need to find a way that security measures allow for new interest to be sparked, not stifled.

In our flight training efforts this can be as simple as making sure that, when airfield security fences are built, they are on the flight line side of the FBO, not before you get to enter the FBO. Flight training providers should make sure that they are actively engaged with airport management and/or municipal structures to help us not only secure our airports, but also to do so in a way that still allows the general community to have some access to the activities that take place at the airport. This will not only help us get new customers to our front desks, but will add to the security process by allowing interaction with airport visitors. This interaction gives us a chance to talk with airport visitors, helping us screen passively for any potential security concerns.

Our community is our best security measure. Sure, it looks great to Congress to be able to show that the TSA has helped airports build fences around all of them, but those measures are only part of the process. The flight training community in most

21

non-part 121 served airports is the most active user of the airport, and thus, the most frequent presence on the airport. FBO's, flight instructors, and designated pilot examiners, especially as many general aviation pilots have reduced their number of hours flown, are our first line of defense for security while at the same time being our first point of promotion of aviation at most airports. There is a balance that is being maintained by these individuals between promotion of interaction with unknown persons and prohibition of access to these same unknown persons who visit our airports.

 As we reduce our numbers of active pilots, it falls more heavily on those of us who are still at the airport to remain vigilant in our security watch, while at the same time trying to encourage new participants. We may think that there are no threats that we must really mitigate at our local airports, but I would challenge pilots and flight training providers to not just think of security as a process by which we keep "terrorists" out, but also a process by which we keep our aircraft safe from potential damage or theft. To do this, we have to work within accepted security practices.

The flight training community has a unique role in this, and a new one. Traditionally, the role of the flight instructor was to teach pilots how to fly. The role of the designated pilot examiner was to see if the instructor was teaching pilots well enough to be safe in the national airspace system. The role of the flight training provider business (such as an FBO) was to provide the equipment and facilities for both of these things to happen. As we have increased security at airports, the role of each of these partners in the flight training community has evolved to include being the point of contact for airport security as well. Flight instructors now must train their customers on local airport (and national) security policies, practices, and authorizations. Flight training providers must now keep record of training for their staff on security concerns, which must be done every year for all staff who have any contact with flight training and audited by local TSA officers yearly. Many local FBOs are the security contact for local airport badging. DPEs must now test CFIs and pilots on security related airspace and airport concerns. This has given the flight training community administrative and security responsibility that was not traditionally a part of the flight training process. I'm not sure if this changes how customers work with these providers, but it may. I do know that it has made some independent flight instructors I know give up training because they don't want to "deal with all the new TSA requirements." This may reduce our ability as an industry to teach new pilots.

For active instructors and flight training providers working in the industry on a daily basis, many who have been doing it for a number of years, the changes in the security practices have been gradual and are generally not considered to be overly onerous. As these providers have gotten used to the practices they have just become a part of daily activity. For less active providers and less active pilots who long for the "way it used to be," these practices may continue to drive the decreasing activity levels we have seen in aviation. This doesn't mean we should reduce our security efforts to get more people

Biplanes in formation.

involved in aviation again. We still need to meet our security needs. However, it does mean we need to be aware of what effects our policies have.

A careful balance between restrictive security practices at airports and allowing access is needed to foster new participants. The flight training community must work closely with security agencies and providers in the development of new methods to ensure access to their services. There is no doubt that we have not seen an end to the development of new security processes and practices; as new threats emerge, new responses will be required. A responsive and security conscious flight training community can continue to be at the forefront of any discussion of security measures in the general aviation community, helping stem further restrictions that drive participants out of the general aviation community, while at the same time helping ensure our airports and operations are more secure.

Jason Blair is a FAA Designated Pilot Examiner and the previous Executive Director of the National Association of Flight Instructors.