

A Call To Arms: Flight Deck Officers are the last line of defense

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“Resolved therefore, that [we] be immediately put into a posture of defense; and that [there] be a Committee to prepare a plan for the embodying, arming, and disciplining such a number of men as may be sufficient for that purpose.” -Patrick Henry

As bookend dates, September 11, 2001 and April 19, 2003, will forever be markers in aviation history. One represents the invasion of U.S. commercial aviation. The other most assuredly is the defense of it. And as much as the pain endured on one day, a salient corner was turned on another — an answer given. An industry became armed with a fortifiable resolve.

Forty-four members of the Federal Flight Deck Officer (FFDO) program were deputized and issued their .40 caliber semi-automatic pistols after successfully achieving proficiency in an intensive training program that has been alternately described as “grueling” but “excellent” by a recent trainee.

Mandated as part of the Homeland Security Act of 2002, Title XIV, this first prototype class represents the Transportation Security Administration’s (TSA’s) enactment of the Arming Pilots Against Terrorism Act (APATA). The purpose of APATA is to provide for the defense of the flight deck of passenger aircraft against acts of criminal violence and air piracy.

Upon passage, APATA required the Administrator of the TSA to establish requirements for FFDOs that address the following:

- Type of firearm and ammunition to be used
- Standards for training and retraining to qualify initially and thereafter
- Placement of the firearm on board the aircraft
- An analysis of the risk of catastrophic failure as a result of the discharge of a firearm into sensitive areas of an aircraft
- The division of responsibilities between pilots
- Procedures for ensuring the firearm does not leave the cockpit
- Interaction between FFDOs and Federal Air Marshalls (FAMs)
- The process for selecting pilots
- The storage and transportation of firearms between flights
- Methods of identifying FFDOs
- Methods of validating the credentials of Law Enforcement Officers (LEOs) authorized to carry firearms aboard an aircraft

To ensure that the requirements of APATA were met, Admiral Loy, Undersecretary of the TSA, chartered a multi-discipline government task force in

December 2002. The task force was comprised of experts with extensive experience in law enforcement, security operations, industrial-organizational psychology and training, Federal acquisition, law enforcement, aviation personnel assessment, and aviation policy and law. This task force proposed design options for the FFDO program, considering the criteria that were mandated by the Act. Largely, the recommendations of the task force established the FFDO program.

One of the key recommendations of the task force advocated that the TSA proceed initially with an FFDO “prototype” class. This concept not only allowed for rapid deployment of the first class of pilots selected to participate in the program, but it also allowed the TSA to evaluate the various elements of the program in real-world conditions, according to TSA Deputy Administrator Stephen McHale. The TSA solicited 100 nominations from two major pilot associations, the Coalition of Airline Pilots Association (CAPA) and the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA). (The Allied Pilots Association is a member of the CAPA organization.) Of the 100 nominees, the TSA selected a cross-section of pilots from different types of carriers and different types of aircraft to undergo the FFDO prototype training.

The training site for the initial class was the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC) in Glynco, GA. The training curriculum for the prototype class included a majority of hours spent in firearms training and defensive training that also included weapons retention. Additional instruction on the use of force policy, and program operating procedures constituted the rest of the program. Trainees, who had already undergone background investigations, were assessed to determine if they were suitable and fit for the FFDO mission. Of critical importance in the assessment process is an FFDO’s willingness and ability to use deadly force when appropriate to do so and to comply with all program requirements.

Administered by the TSA, the program’s initial investment for the first class is estimated at about \$6,200 per pilot volunteer. This figure allows for roughly \$2,100 in direct training costs for the pilot and includes tangibles such as transportation, equipment, and room and board. (The TSA will not fund future trainees’ room and boarding expenses although APA has recommended that they do so.) The other \$4,100 cost is the estimate for equipping and selecting FFDOs as well as for instructor training and start-up expenses for the program, which includes the expenditure for necessary infrastructure to support the program. The TSA already has \$8 million earmarked for the program for the remainder of 2003 and is asking for another \$25 million for fiscal year 2004. It is expected that enough funding is currently available to train an additional 18-20 classes. If funding is approved for the next fiscal year, the TSA estimates that several thousand FFDOs could be field deployed by the end of 2004.

Costs aside, the magnitude of training even a fraction of the 60,000 U.S. commercial airline pilots is enormous. Additionally, legislation is currently before Congress that would allow more than 10,000 cargo pilots to also be eligible to have firearms in the cockpit, provided they agree to background checks, screening, and training.

Will training and deputizing airline pilots prove to be an advantageous policy as an aircraft's last line of defense? Yes, according to a Wall Street Journal editorial. Surveys have overwhelmingly shown that 75% of commercial pilots and a similar percentage of the public favor arming pilots, supporting the idea that the majority of people surveyed have faith that this is the best choice for a final defense barrier. Almost 70% of pilots have served in the military and have some familiarity with the use of firearms. As the program rollout continues, other measures of effectiveness may become visible, such as putting the general public at ease once again about commercial air travel. The fact that FFDOs have flown hundreds of flights as of today without any reported operational problems is a testament of the commitment of both the TSA as administrator of the program and the FFDOs' desire to be part of the solution and not an added problem to aviation security.

Since the conclusion of the initial class, the TSA has actively sought insight and suggestions from the 44 deputized FFDOs, even establishing a 24-hour hotline for FFDOs to use not only for input that relates to the program but also for reporting any unresolved issues that might arise. FFDOs may send e-mails to a secured site, and future conference calls are planned to solicit additional feedback over the next three to six months. The TSA has queried trainees on the suitability of the FLETC training facilities, and the structure and composition of the training courses, among other things, and has included two FFDO representatives from the prototype class in its program review process. Overall, the response has been positive in this area. McHale has stated that the TSA has already made some adjustments in the program based on FFDO input thus illustrating some desire to be flexible enough to adjust the training in order to achieve the best possible product for a pilot trainee.

What can you expect if you volunteer to participate in the program? Interviews with two deputized FFDOs provide a glimpse into the circumstances of these FFDOs and their motivation for applying to the program. Because of nondisclosure requirements that FFDOs are required to maintain, they are referred to as "FFDO Mike" and "FFDO Steve."

Both FFDOs share similarities. For instance, both these FFDOs had military backgrounds. Both FFDOs consider themselves to be in very good physical shape, exercising on a regular basis. But while FFDO Mike found the defense tactics portion of the course to be moderately challenging, FFDO Steve, who runs daily, did not. He stated that FFDOs "definitely need to be prepared to move around." Both, however, were quick to praise the training and the instruction

given in this segment of the course and to point out that anyone who was motivated to volunteer for the course could achieve an acceptable proficiency.

Both FFDOs held mental impressions of the class that paralleled each other. In fact, although they were interviewed separately, each used the same words and phrases to describe the class participants: “diverse,” “all physical sizes were represented,” “broad array.” Also, both Flight Deck Officers reiterated that the class was “intense” and “focused.”

Differences, however, emerged in discussing how to better the program for future FFDOs. Although FFDO Mike said that his expectations were more than met by the conclusion of the training, the fact that so much information was given in a condensed amount of time was a challenge to him. He felt that a person who was highly organized would have an advantage in this program and that those without extremely developed organizational skills would feel the effects of the fast-paced timing. On the other hand, FFDO Steve felt that the scheduling of the program could be improved. He said the days were very long but also knows that, as the first class, adjustments will be made to improve the efficiency of material covered.

Another difference was the degree of exposure to firearms both officers had previous to entering the program. FFDO Mike has a background in law enforcement which he figures might have been a key reason he was selected from the group of 100 pilot nominees considered by the TSA. On the other hand, FFDO Steve has had limited exposure to firearms; he had a weapons requirement in the military of only two hours per year.

Both FFDOs had personal expectations for themselves prior to taking the training. FFDO Steve wanted to develop proficiency with firearms and to learn the procedures for use of weapons. He feels that he did achieve this very adequately. However, he was surprised at the realistic, day-to-day details of transporting, carrying, and then stowing a firearm. He practices the course’s recommended safety precautions at his home and feels comfortable about the safety measures he learned from his training. Because of his law enforcement history, FFDO Mike is used to carrying weapons and handling the responsibilities associated with them. He had anticipated the logistical details as outlined by the TSA’s procedures concerning lockboxes and aircraft hold stowage. He is used to, and follows, safe weapons storage procedures at his home. But he asserts that this is not a program about guns. “It is about aviation security and preventing any more 9/11s. The FFDO program is complimentary to the Federal Air Marshall program, not competitive with it.”

FFDO Steve feels greater responsibility as an FFDO for getting people safely to their destination. He, like Mike, immediately recalled 9/11 and recounted the events that unfolded for him that day. He was piloting a flight and was at the

midway point over the Atlantic Ocean when news of the tragedy reached him. Security personnel had already delayed the flight's departure because of certain security concerns. He recalled feeling very ill at ease with the news of airliners slamming into the World Trade Center combined with the pre-departure security concerns. "I remember wondering if I was going to be able to prevent a person from breaching the cockpit if they were intent on doing so." Accordingly, he decided on certain precautions including — among other things — arming the flight attendants with knives and cutting off all cabin/ground satellite communications. "The thought occurred to me for the first time that I needed a gun. That thought became the basis for my support and participation in the FFDO program."

No one denies that this program is in its infancy and will experience growing pains. The TSA exhibits a willingness to explore new and better methodologies. Still, differences have developed between pilot groups and the TSA, primarily over TSA operating procedures. Pilot groups point to the onerous procedure FFDOs must use when carrying their assigned weapons. These procedures are more strenuous when the FFDO is on a flight deadheading or commuting, but they also come into play every time a pilot leaves the cockpit. The language of APATA appears to contradict itself in different areas on this issue.

Another area of concern regards the scope of the program.

APA and other pilot groups object to the exclusion of cargo pilots. [Legislation is being considered on this subject.] Additionally, some pilots believe that flight engineers should be permitted to become FFDOs. And, naturally, pilot groups are anxious for their members to be trained in a timely manner. They advocate oversight of the training at various private facilities that are available.

The driving factor behind this program is September 11. Both FFDOs talked about the impact of that day and its importance to the safety and security of their aircraft. Both realize that, if called upon to carry out the duties of the FFDO, they would be doing so with the knowledge that their actions literally would constitute the last line of defense for the aircraft, and passengers and crew aboard it. Both made that resolve on September 11.

It has been said that every hero mirrors the time and place in which he lives and that a hero must reflect men's innermost hopes and beliefs in a public way. While the memory of 9/11 is still painful, the FFDO program stands face-to-face with the challenge tauntingly made by terrorists intent on destruction. The FFDO program is a layer of security that is the best choice for the aircraft's last line of defense, not because of the training and support FFDOs receive (although this is absolutely necessary), but because the men and women who choose to volunteer for the FFDO program have themselves firmly resolved their call to arms.