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BEFORE THE

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION SECURITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE
PROTECTION
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY**

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

July 15, 2009



Good afternoon, Madame Chairwoman, Ranking Member Dent, and Members of the Subcommittee. I am Carlton Mann, Assistant Inspector General (AIG) for Inspections for the Office of Inspector General (OIG) at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our recent report *TSA's Role in General Aviation Security*.

Background

In early February 2007, a Houston-area television station broadcast a report that alleged there were deficiencies in security at regional airports near the city, and that those deficiencies represented a serious homeland security threat. The broadcast was titled “Is Houston a Sitting Duck For Terrorism?”

The report described visits by reporters to some of the area's general aviation airports to test airport security. Three were mentioned specifically: Sugar Land Regional Airport in the town of Sugar Land, about 25 miles southwest of Houston; David Wayne Hooks Airport in Spring, 30 miles northwest of the city; and Lone Star Executive Airport in Conroe, 45 miles to the north.

Madame Chairwoman, you conveyed to us your concerns about the implications of this report and requested we examine the issue as it pertains to the Department of Homeland Security. After meeting with you and your staff, we undertook field visits to all three airports and to a few other general aviation facilities near other major metropolitan areas: Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York.

Our Review

General aviation is commonly defined as all aircraft operations other than military and scheduled commercial passenger traffic. The vast majority of flight operations in the United States, approximately 230,000 aircraft, are engaged in general aviation. There are approximately 20,000 airfields and helipads at which no scheduled commercial passenger operations normally occur – only general aviation. Even at commercial airports, there is usually some type of a general aviation operation.

As is normal in our evaluation process, before we began, we defined our inspection objectives to align with the interest expressed in the situation near Houston, and the implications of general aviation activities occurring near major cities. We also focused, as we must, on DHS activities and responsibilities. This is significant because most aspects of aircrew, aircraft, and airfield operations are overseen by the Federal Aviation Administration within the Department of Transportation.

Our team visited ten airports and interviewed managers and security staff. At each site, we also met with the nearest Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officials responsible for aviation security. We examined government and public records, consulted with some industry stakeholders, and obtained information from TSA headquarters.

It would not have been practical for our office to perform any kind of comprehensive assessment of the entire industry. Our objectives for this inspection were to identify TSA security requirements for general aviation airports, threats to general aviation, measures taken to secure general aviation, steps nonfederal stakeholders have taken to enhance the security of general aviation, and any “incidents of concern” with security at general aviation airports.

Our Findings

We believe that the basic facts contained in the television report were accurate. However, we did not conclude that those facts were of significance from a homeland security perspective.

For example, one of the incidents described the television crew driving up to a closed gate at David Wayne Hooks Airfield, ringing the callbox for admission, and being admitted. The report stated: “A loud buzzing occurred and the gate slid open letting us past the barb wire and onto the tarmac. No one asked us any questions.”

When our team visited Hooks, we were told that this is exactly what is supposed to happen. The purpose of the remote-controlled gate with the intercom is to ensure that airfield personnel will be aware of any vehicle coming onto that section of the field. From that point on, the vehicle and its passengers can be monitored or questioned as necessary to maintain safe operations. The system is not intended to provide an opportunity to interrogate the visitor, merely to establish oversight and control.

The television report also described fencing at Sugar Land Regional Airport that does not completely encircle the perimeter of the field. Our inspectors examined this fence, and also the unfenced areas of the property, which border a prison and a swamp. Managers at Sugar Land told us that the purpose of the fencing is to direct normally occurring pedestrian and vehicle traffic off the landscaped portions of the property facing the main road and onto the paved passages intended for their access. The airport property includes large unused acreage quite some distance from aircraft operations. The most important aspects of the facility’s security program, managers told us, involved maintaining control over the flight line area, not distant unused grass. Any fence, they added, could easily be scaled by an intruder. And whatever threat an intruder would pose on the perimeter of the property is no greater than the threat the same person would pose if he or she was ten feet further away but on the other side of a fence.

The third and final incident in the report involved the television reporter entering Lone Star Executive Airport and walking close to a parked aircraft. As managers at all three airfields told us, it is not uncommon for people on foot to approach parked aircraft at a public airfield. Unlike commercial aviation, where airport passengers are sequestered and then led down a ramp and onto the plane, at general aviation facilities individuals walk directly to the aircraft. An aircraft owner, who is frequently the pilot, usually does not wear a uniform and their passengers do not have tickets. Airfield personnel, maintenance teams, and pilots and their passengers might be near the flight line all day. We were told that security did not involve separating aircraft from people. The greater and more important security issues are:

- Is the aircraft under the control of its owner?

- Is its flight system (not necessarily its door) locked or otherwise inoperable by others?
- Is the person who is approaching the aircraft being observed from a security post or control tower?
- Is any suspicious activity occurring near the aircraft?
- Is all aircraft movement coordinated with the control tower or with base operations?

It is possible, of course, to steal an aircraft. We do not assert that no one can fly a plane without the owner's permission. It is, however, extremely rare, and almost certain to be noticed.

Our review also examined the several cases in which aircraft have for one reason or another struck buildings. We are of course forever mindful of the horrible events of September 11, 2001. Nevertheless, in most cases when an aircraft impacts a building, the damage to the building and its occupants has been limited.

At each of the airfields we visited, we asked for information about any incidents of concern relating to general aviation facilities or aircraft. There were none. We also requested information from TSA about incidents reported to the General Aviation Hotline. TSA gave us detailed year-by-year lists, which showed that the number of reports had declined since 2004 (the first year for which we collected data) and that in 2007, the last full year before our fieldwork, the total was 66 reports, nationwide. Most of these were characterized simply as "suspicious activity," though a few were for property theft, vandalism, unlocked gates, or an anonymous tip about narcotics smuggling.

What Has DHS Been Doing?

As I indicated earlier, one of our objectives for this inspection was to identify TSA security requirements for general aviation airports, and to identify measures taken by TSA to secure general aviation. A list of those measures is contained in our report. We did not evaluate cost benefit issues relating to those measures or make any judgments about them.

We determined that TSA, even while it actively pursued all its other mandates, had also paid significant attention to general aviation. This was true both in the Office for Transportation Sector Network Management and in the Office of Intelligence.

When one of our inspections reveals deficiencies or inefficiencies in a DHS program we normally address a recommendation to the component head to rectify the condition. In this instance, we did not identify problems with TSA's activities and we therefore released the results of our inspection without making recommendations to TSA.

Risk and Threat

Various government and industry studies have concluded that the risks associated with general aviation are relatively limited. Reports previously released by the General Accountability Office (GAO) and the Congressional Research Service (CRS) are consistent with this view. In a

November 2004 review, GAO concluded that “the small size, lack of fuel capacity, and minimal destructive power of most general aviation aircraft make them unattractive to terrorists, and thereby, reduce the possibility of threat associated with their misuse.” GAO recommended that TSA develop a plan for implementing a risk management approach to strengthen general aviation security, and that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) establish a documented process to review and revalidate flight restrictions. TSA and FAA generally concurred with GAO’s recommendations.

In January 2008, the Congressional Research Service reported that typical general aviation aircraft are too light to use as a platform for conventional explosives. Moreover, heightened vigilance among airport operators and pilots would make it difficult to load the necessary quantity of explosives without detection. The report concluded that as a platform for conventional explosives, the threat posed by light general aviation aircraft is relatively small compared to the threat posed by trucks.

In March 2008, the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA) report, General Aviation Security, noted that GAO had observed that although nuclear power facilities were not designed specifically to withstand a terrorist aviation attack, they are among the most hardened industrial facilities in the United States, as they were designed to withstand tornadoes, hurricanes, fires, floods, and earthquakes. The study concluded that most general aviation aircraft could not penetrate the concrete containment vessel of a nuclear power plant, release radiation through an explosion, or otherwise severely damage nuclear power plants.

We reviewed details of several well-publicized incidents involving general aviation accidents involving municipal areas – the Tampa and New York City incidents we mentioned in our report, and a third incident we did not include involving an ultra-light aircraft in Germany. None of these incidents had consequences of national security significance – in the New York City and Tampa cases there was damage to, but no fatalities within, the buildings. The German case seems to have been a suicide.

Many risk scenarios describe the hypothetical delivery of a destructive device to a population center. For such a purpose, a large truck is probably a superior vehicle. Aircraft in flight are highly visible by large audiences, and most airspace particularly airspace near major metropolitan areas is well monitored by civil and military authorities.

An intelligence analyst at TSA explained the distinction that is usually made between risk and threat. Risk is sometimes defined as the intent and the capability of the hostile actor; threat is the vulnerability of the target and the consequence if the attack succeeds. If it is easier to steal a small private plane than a commercial airliner, there is a general aviation risk. If a small private plane cannot do much damage on impact, there is not a general aviation threat.

Conclusion

We are aware that the results of our report may be used by those involved in arguing for or against some particular piece of regulation. We do not believe that our report is extensive enough support such a debate. On the Internet, one of the most-frequently quoted sentences from our report: "... general aviation presents only limited and mostly hypothetical threats to security." We believe this to be true, and more importantly, it is consistent with threat information we reviewed.

At the same time, we acknowledge the limited scope of our work on this inspection. In an informal communication we received from TSA after sharing our draft with them, they pointed out to us that all of our airport visits were arranged in advance, that we made no independent efforts to verify security measures, and that we visited very few sites. This is true. Our inspection techniques were tailored to the objectives of our review, not to an exhaustive evaluation of the general aviation industry.

Madame Chairwoman, this concludes my prepared remarks. I would be happy to answer any questions that you or the Subcommittee Members may have.