

DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

Office of Inspector General

**Audit of Airport Passenger and
Checked Baggage Screening Performance**

(Unclassified Summary)



OIG-08-25

February 2008



**Homeland
Security**

February 14, 2008

Preface

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Inspector General (OIG) was established by the Homeland Security Act of 2002 (*Public Law 107-296*) by amendment to the Inspector General Act of 1978. This is one of a series of audit, inspection, and special reports prepared as part of our oversight responsibilities to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness within the department.

This report addresses the strengths and weaknesses of the Transportation Security Administration's procedures, equipment, and supervision to ensure that Transportation Security Officers are able to prevent threat items from being introduced into the sterile areas and checked baggage systems of the nation's airports. It is based on interviews with Transportation Security Officers and Transportation Security Administration officials, direct observations, field testing, and a review of applicable documents.

The recommendations herein have been developed to the best knowledge available to our office, and have been discussed in draft with those responsible for implementation. It is our hope that this report will result in more effective, efficient, and economical operations. We express our appreciation to all of those who contributed to the preparation of this report.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Richard L. Skinner".

Richard L. Skinner
Inspector General

OIG

*Department of Homeland Security
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Background

We conducted unannounced, covert testing at eight domestic airports, from late May 2007 through August 2007. Because the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has deployed explosives trace portals in a number of airports for operational use, and is continuing to test Whole Body Imagers (WBI) in a pilot program at one airport, we included locations that were using these technologies when we made our airport selections.

Our purpose in testing was to determine whether: (1) the Transportation Security Administration's screening procedures and standards are adequate; (2) Transportation Security Officers are following those screening procedures and standards; and (3) aviation security screening equipment and technologies are functioning properly and as intended.

Our screening checkpoint tests included attempts to pass from the public area of each selected airport to the sterile area through the passenger screening checkpoint carrying weapons and simulated improvised explosive devices (IEDs). For our checked baggage tests, we introduced bags containing simulated IEDs into the baggage system at each airport we visited.

Specifically, a "test" at a passenger screening checkpoint was defined as one tester attempting to take one threat object through the checkpoint into the sterile area undetected on his or her body or in his or her carry-on bag. A "test" at a checked bag screening location was defined as one or two testers introducing a bag with a simulated IED inside it into the checked baggage system.

A "pass" occurred if the threat object was identified by screening personnel and prevented from being carried into the sterile area through the screening checkpoint or being put into the baggage system downstream from the checked baggage screening location. A "fail" occurred when the threat object was not detected at the screening checkpoint, or the checked bag was cleared for flight.

Results of Audit

The number of tests conducted, the names of the airports tested, and the quantitative and qualitative results of our testing are classified. We have shared that information with the Department, the Transportation Security Administration, and appropriate congressional committees.

As a result of our testing, we made six recommendations to TSA, which concurred with all of them. When fully implemented, these recommendations will improve an already strong passenger and checked baggage screening process.

We gave a copy of our draft report to TSA for review and comment. The unclassified portion of TSA's response to our draft report is summarized below.

TSA's Response

The security of the nation's aviation system is a collaboration of public and private sector elements working together to provide effective protection for travelers and the flow of goods. This coordinated effort to protect the aviation system is designed to defeat threats, reduce vulnerabilities, minimize the consequences of, and expedite the recovery from attacks that might occur. TSA screening of persons and property continues to be a vital and successful element of the overall aviation security system. The effectiveness of TSA screening is due to the layered approach to aviation security, greater emphasis on unpredictable screening methods, and systematic improvements implemented in the screening process.

The President's National Strategy for Homeland Security recognizes that our Nation cannot envision or prepare for every potential threat. The National Strategy accepts a certain level of risk as a permanent condition. Managing the security risk requires a prioritization of resources and the diversification of protective responsibilities among all of our Nation's homeland security partners. The passenger screening system is structured with the knowledge that there are vulnerabilities in the system; however, the vulnerabilities vary in degree and TSA's risk-based approach effectively addresses those that could lead to catastrophic events.

TSA passenger and baggage screening, collectively, is one of 19 interlinked layers of security protecting aviation. Each and every

one of these 19 security layers is important and strong; linked together, they are effective and formidable. The reinforced, multiple security layers create a system of which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The 9/11 Commission recognized the importance of a layered security system given that no single security measure is foolproof.

As part of its role in the layered security system, TSA is enhancing the effectiveness of screening by expanding the unpredictability of screening measures. TSA has instituted a proactive approach to screening by changing what we do, how we do it, where we do it, and how often. TSA constantly reviews and implements changes to specific screening techniques, TSO interactions with travelers, and the level of resources needed to detect hostile intent.

TSA recognizes the value of covert testing and uses the results to make operational decisions. In April 2007, TSA established the Aviation Screening Assessment Program to create a more systematic framework to assess the effectiveness of the screening process and provide statistically sound data. This program performed thousands of covert tests at airports nationwide in 2007. Under separate training programs, TSA conducts over a thousand covert tests for IED's and almost 70,000 electronic image tests—*every day*. Together with the results of covert testing performed by TSA's Office of Inspection, TSA is able to analyze statistically sound data to better identify which aspects of the screening process need to be strengthened or revised.

TSA already has a number of initiatives underway to address OIG's findings and satisfy its recommendations. For example, TSA's Office of Security Operations is considering additional levels of procedural unpredictability to complicate and disrupt terrorist plans. TSA's Office of Security Technology recently purchased Advanced Technology x-ray systems which will provide high definition x-ray images and multiple viewing angles along with some automated detection capabilities. These systems will be deployed in 2008. TSA is continuing the testing of WBI technology and filters, which was the subject of testing by the OIG.

The most significant change to TSA screening operations is expected to be implemented at multiple Category X airports in 2008. TSA will be introducing an improved screening checkpoint that focuses on three initiatives: (1) improving hostile intent detection by reducing routine travel "noise" and focusing on telltale behavior; (2) deploying proven technology to screen for

explosives on passengers and carry-on bags; and (3) reducing congestion and engaging passengers at more points in the journey—directly or indirectly.

Although OIG covert testing focused only on the single security layer of passenger and baggage screening, TSA values OIG's covert testing results and finds its recommendations useful. OIG's testing of passenger and baggage screening demonstrates that a concerted effort may target any one layer.

Appendix A
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