

## The Faces of Air Rage

By Harry A. Kern, M.Ed.

Two in-flight incidents occurred aboard a domestic cross-country commercial airline flight that demanded law enforcement attention upon arrival at the destination. One involved a belligerent, intoxicated female adult passenger who assaulted a female flight attendant when asked to assume a seated position with her seat belt fastened during encountered air turbulence. The flight attendant received minor personal injury, which interfered with her ability to perform as a crew member for the remainder of the flight, potentially affecting passenger safety. The second incident involved an adult male passenger who sexually assaulted a 13-year-old unaccompanied female passenger. She promptly reported the incident to a flight attendant. Which of these incidents is considered “air rage”?<sup>1</sup>

Unruly behavior aboard commercial airliners is not new. One of the first reported cases, in 1947, involved an intoxicated and unruly male passenger on a flight from Havana, Cuba, to Miami, Florida, who physically assaulted a fellow passenger, causing injury.<sup>2</sup> Recently, reported incidents have been wide ranging, involving both males and females of all ages, income levels, and occupations. Statistically, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has reported an overall increase in the number of incidents attributed to unruly passengers in recent years.<sup>3</sup>

News media coined the term *air rage* in the 1990s; although opinions vary as to its causes and what it encompasses, popular culture uses the term often in describing various incidents that occur during air travel. Multidisciplinary research (examining psychological, sociological, physiological, and related human factors) coupled with more thorough collection of information on incidents of passenger misconduct can add focus and help in the recognition, assessment, and control of air rage.

### Problems in Defining Air Rage

The lack of a specific description of air rage and what it encompasses has made recognizing it difficult. An examination of the words *air* and *rage* provides

some idea of its definition. The word *rage* originates from the Latin word *rabia* (from which the English word *rabies* is derived) and denotes a presence of madness, violent and uncontrolled anger, a fit of violent wrath, violent action, or an intense feeling.<sup>4</sup> The word *air* preceding it identifies these behaviors as occurring during air travel. However, in further defining air rage, research has revealed different opinions concerning which behaviors may comprise it.

Some terms generally used to describe air rage have included air rage,<sup>5</sup> sky rage, disruptive passenger syndrome,<sup>6</sup> passenger interference,<sup>7</sup> unruly passengers and in-flight disruption, violence to crew members and passengers,<sup>8</sup> and extreme misbehavior by unruly passengers.<sup>9</sup> These terms, particularly when considered collectively, seem to imply that *any* misbehavior or criminal activity by an airline passenger aboard an aircraft or within an airport may represent air rage.

### Behaviors Comprising Air Rage

While further research is needed, it seems logical that *some*, not all, criminal behavior during air travel may characterize air rage, specifically violent or disruptive behavior affecting the flight crew or

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passengers.<sup>10</sup> This includes such behavior as mere noncompliance with safety directives or other airline rules; verbal outbursts, such as shouting, belligerence, and the use of profanity; physical displays of aggression, such as threatening gestures or intended harm to others; and assaultive behavior that results in property damage, injury, or death. These incidents occur in a variety of areas, both in airports and aboard aircraft, between the offender and airline employees or other passengers. Often, they seem unprovoked, such as when an airline employee asks a passenger simply to return a seat to an upright position or to extinguish a cigarette.

Recognizing and potentially controlling air rage require an understanding of the factors surrounding these incidents. These may include substance abuse, logistical problems and the resulting stress and frustration, questionable mental capacity, and the lack of training of airline personnel and the traveling public.

Alcohol or other drug impairment fuels some air rage incidents. While existing airline regulations forbid the boarding of intoxicated passengers, controversy surrounds the issue of commercial airlines restricting the onboard consumption of alcohol by passengers. Additionally, some airline employees cite the difficulty of enforcing an alcohol service policy, particularly when circumstances and better judgment dictate otherwise. Illegal or prescription drugs, perhaps in addition to alcohol, also frequently influence passenger behavior.

Passenger stress, frustration, and lack of coping skills, which also may facilitate air rage incidents, can stem from various logistical problems that often accompany air travel. These problems have increased over the years with the availability of low fares; airline personnel process increasing numbers of passengers, now representing most socioeconomic levels, often without ample time to assess their relative purpose, emotional state, and physical condition. Long lines at various points during air travel, such as those at security screening check

points subsequent to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks; flight delays, particularly when communication from the airline company is lacking; and, sometimes, a lack of space, comfort, or basic physical needs, such as when passengers report poor air quality, all can frustrate passengers. Aggressive industry marketing helps drive not only many of the delays and incidents of overcrowding but also high customer expectations. These high expectations, and the disappointment when those expectations go unmet, further can fuel passenger misconduct.

Air rage incidents also may stem from the basic mental state of some passengers. For example, a passenger may suffer from a form of mental illness, such as dementia, or some type of phobia, such as claustrophobia, that may cause them to behave in a manner perceived as disruptive or, perhaps, dangerous. Often, it is difficult to recognize and effectively deal with such individuals.

Lack of training, both of airline personnel and the general public, also may help cause incidents of air rage. The lack of training of airline personnel may impede their ability not only to diffuse potentially disruptive or dangerous situations involving passengers but also to recognize, before boarding, passengers who could pose a threat. In

addition, the lack of training of the traveling public about expectations, regulations, unacceptable behavior, and the consequences thereof may help facilitate many incidents of air rage. Such training would promote better understanding for everyone and logically lead to a safer, more enjoyable traveling experience.

### **Problems in Assessment**

Gathering and assessing information concerning air rage incidents can prove difficult. Not only do reporting practices vary between governmental agencies and airline companies, but the reporting mechanisms used often contain only some essential information, omitting many details concerning the factors surrounding these incidents. This may result in



incomplete (as pertinent details surrounding these incidents may be omitted), as well as inconsistent and conflicting reporting (as many of these incidents may be mislabeled as air rage). Additionally, the records of many governmental agencies and airline companies prove difficult to obtain.

Airline company policies differ as to when air rage incidents are reported, or not, and when to leave the decision to employee discretion. Inadequate communications, worker shortages, time pressures, employee fear, and staff-performance measurement systems that may encourage conflict avoidance versus resolution, all may contribute to potential offenders' boarding of airplanes.<sup>11</sup> Differing policies of, and representation by, unions, such as those representing pilots, flight attendants, and other industry personnel, add to the overall mix of describing, reporting, and subsequent actions taken, or not taken, in response to the problem of air rage.

Also, judicial, sentencing, and other records may serve as an informational source as to what legal actions occur as a result of air rage incidents. Whether these reports contain the necessary detailed information to determine specific offenders' behaviors on a consistent basis to support research is another matter. Incidents of air rage potentially are handled at the federal, state, or local level, and the level of detail in the reporting may vary accordingly.

### Issues for Law Enforcement

Various laws govern passenger conduct aboard aircraft and around domestic airports; when violating them, offenders may face verbal or written warnings, arrest, criminal prosecution, administrative hearings,

and civil actions. Law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and judicial personnel must know and consistently enforce these laws, tempering their actions with the spirit of the law to assure order maintenance and passenger and crew safety during air travel. Federal, state, and local officials, working with an understanding of respective jurisdictions and prosecutive guidelines, will better address these incidents when they occur. Adequate training can ensure law enforcement personnel meet the varied and complex duties associated with airport policing.<sup>12</sup> As a possible future consideration, law enforcement

agencies could benefit from using the Uniform Crime Reporting system to track air rage incidents.

Additionally, the creation of the Department of Homeland Security should benefit the security of air travel. For example, the education of, and communication with, the traveling public on topics, such as expected passenger conduct during air travel, the need for heightened awareness for out-of-the-ordinary situations, safety procedures, and travel tips, may improve; this could

help in reducing delays, anxiety, and frustration when traveling aboard aircraft. Also, the assumed presence of more federal air marshals could result in fewer air rage incidents aboard commercial aircraft.

### Conclusion

Until more fully defined, air rage only can function as a popular term, not a legal one. Greater comprehensive research and more complete data can help in the recognition, assessment, and control of air rage incidents.

Law enforcement agencies can enforce various laws governing passenger behavior; these largely

### Incidents of Passenger Misconduct 1995-2002

1995	146
1996	188
1997	321
1998	282
1999	310
2000	321
2001	321
2002	216*

\*as of December 12

Source: *Federal Aviation Administration*

depend on the cooperation of airline personnel, passengers, and, potentially, different jurisdictions. Enforcing them effectively will help keep order in airports and aboard aircraft by deterring passenger misbehavior.

The topic of air rage strikes fear into much of the traveling public, as well as many who work in or around the airline industry. A more complete understanding of this problem would help achieve the ultimate goal—to ensure the safety and pleasure of air travel. ♦

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In this article, the author emphasizes the need for a standard definition of air rage. The author uses the term throughout the article for purposes of discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Bor, Morris Russell, Justin Parker, and Linda Papadopoulas, "Managing Disruptive Passengers: A Survey of the World's Airlines"; retrieved on March 3, 2003, from <http://www.skyrage.org/pdf/academic/rbor.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Federal Aviation Administration, "Unruly Passengers, Calendar Years 1995-2002"; retrieved on March 3, 2003, from <http://www2.faa.gov/index.cfm/apa/1077>.

<sup>4</sup> *Merriam-Webster's On-Line Collegiate Dictionary*; retrieved on March 3, 2003, from <http://www.m-w.com>.

<sup>5</sup> Donato J. Borrillo, M.D., J.D., "Air Rage: Modern Day Dogfight"; retrieved on March 3, 2003, from <http://www.cami.jccbi.gov/aam-400a/fasmb/fas9902/airrage.htm>; and *The Word Spy*; retrieved on March 3, 2003, from <http://www.logophilia.com/wordspy/airrage.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Supra note 2.

<sup>7</sup> Testimony of Captain Stephen Luckey, Chairman, National Security Committee, Airline Pilots Association, before the Subcommittee on Aviation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, U.S. House of Representatives, 06/11/98; retrieved on March 3, 2003, from <http://cf.alpa.org/internet/tm/sum61198.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> *The Skyrage Foundation*; retrieved on March 3, 2003, from <http://www.skyrage.org/goalspage.html>.

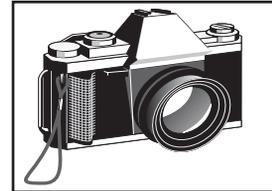
<sup>9</sup> *Airsafe.com*; retrieved on March 3, 2003, from <http://www.airsafe.com/issues/rage.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> William P. Schwabb, "Air Rage: Screaming for International Uniformity," *The Transnational Lawyer* 14 (2001); retrieved on March 3, 2003, from <http://www.skyrage.org/pdf/academic/bschwab.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Blair J. Berkeley and Mohammad Ala, "Identifying and Controlling Threatening Airline Passengers," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly* (Cornell University, August 2001): 12.

<sup>12</sup> Robert T. Raffel, "Airport Policing: Training Issues and Options," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, September 2001, 26-29.

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