



Everything Jersey

## The Star-Ledger

### Feds are all wet on airport security

Thursday, August 24, 2006

Bruce DeCell is a guy from Staten Island who works with a group of relatives of Sept. 11 victims called 9/11 Families for a Secure America. The group adheres to the quaint notion that the Department of Homeland Security should actually occupy itself with making the homeland secure.

A first step, says DeCell, would be to ensure that undocumented foreigners cannot employ questionable forms of ID to move around this country. When DeCell learned how easy it is for undocumented aliens to get past Homeland Security officials with those "matricula consular" cards issued by the Mexican government, he decided to get one of his own. He sent a passport photo and a few bucks to a vendor out in Los Angeles. Back in the mail came a photo ID accepted by the U.S. government.

Not too long ago, DeCell used the bogus ID to gain entry to the headquarters of Homeland Security in Washington, D.C., where he met with officials. He also uses it regularly to board planes. And so far no one has commented on the address printed next to his smiling picture: "123 Fraud Boulevard, Tijuana."

Pretty funny -- if you didn't lose any family members on Sept. 11. But DeCell's son-in-law died in the World Trade Center attacks. He therefore takes a dim view of the Department of Homeland Security.

"It's a joke," said DeCell. "The people we met with down in D.C. were just young political appointees. It's very frightening."

It's even more frightening when you consider the panicked reaction of U.S. officials to that plot by a British-based terror group to blow up airplanes over the Atlantic. The plot reportedly involved the planned use of the deadly explosive triacetone triperoxide, or TATP.

Homeland Security reacted to the threat by banning all liquids from carry-on luggage. One problem: TATP is a solid, not a liquid.

Nonetheless, American air travel was thrown for a loop by that hastily issued ban on liquids. The threat, we were told at the time, was that terrorists could employ chemicals derived from commonly used liquid products to formulate TATP, which is a powder, on the plane.

Not so fast. One British journalist, Thomas Greene of the Register, wrote an excellent article, available on the Internet, in which he pointed out that to make TATP, a terrorist would need a lot more than some nail polish remover, some hydrogen peroxide and a bit of acid. He'd also need a whole lot of chemistry equipment, a whole lot of ice, a whole lot of luck and -- perhaps most important -- a whole lot of time, at least five hours.

I made some calls to chemists and confirmed that the process of formulating TATP is indeed something far more likely to be done in a laboratory than a lavatory. That was reassuring. But here's something that isn't: Getting the finished product on the plane might not be so tough at all. Only about 9 ounces of powdered TATP would be enough to bring down a plane. Initial media reports said this is unlikely because powdered TATP is too unstable and would likely blow up in its hiding place. But this is apparently not the case. Jimmie Oxley, a University of Rhode Island chemist who has formulated TATP for research in preventing terror at

tacks, told me "it's not that touchy."

So why not just smuggle powdered TATP onto the plane? I discussed this with Dan Watts, a chemist at the New Jersey Institute of Technology who has expertise in screening technology. At the moment, Watts said, the screening devices are set to detect nitrogen- based explosives, a category that doesn't include TATP.

"If it was something labeled 'foot powder,' they wouldn't take a second glance," said Watts. "It quite likely would just go right through."

But it probably wouldn't get through the security system at El- Al Airlines, says Isaac Yeffet. Yeffet, the former security chief for El Al, now runs a consulting business in New York. He is not a fan of the one-size-fits-all, granny-groping approach employed by the Department of Homeland Security. Yeffet says American needs to rely less on technology and more on personal observations. Another term for that might be "profiling."

But "profiling" is a dirty word in politically correct America. But Yeffet gave me two examples of how profiling saved lives on El Al. In one case, an unsuspecting Irish woman was used as a bomb courier by her fiancé, a terrorist who lived in England. The terrorist put her on a plane with "presents" for his Palestinian relatives. It was only after she was grilled by El Al security that one of the presents was found to be a bomb. In a similar case, profilers found bombs in the luggage of a common thief who had been duped by terrorists into thinking he was smuggling drugs. In both cases, Yeffet said, the bombs had gotten through screening.

"Those two cases alone saved the lives of 500 to 600 passengers," said Yeffet.

As for the chances of a guy from Staten Island getting on an El Al airplane with a fake Mexican ID that reads "123 Fraud Boulevard," well, don't ask.

I didn't. I didn't want Yeffet laughing at me the same way he laughs at the Department of Homeland Security.

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