

Air Security Officers: making our skies safe

The AFP is responsible for Australia's Air Security Officer Program as part of its coordination role in aviation security. The program was developed in response to the Australian Government's aviation enhancement initiative announced in 2001.

Manager of Specialist Groups Aviation, Matthew Graham, gave *Platypus* an update on the program and the role of air security officers (ASOs).

What is an air security officer?

Matthew Graham: ASOs are specially trained protective service officers who travel on selected flights to provide security against the threat of hijack. Their training equips them with the skills and capabilities they need to deal with an individual or group that may try to take control of an aircraft.

How long have we had ASOs?

MG: The air security officers started travelling on domestic flights in December 2001 in response to the September 11 attacks in the United States of America (USA). Two years later the program was expanded to include International flights.

Do other countries have similar programs?

MG: Yes, there are more than 24 countries with similar programs in place. Our program meets international best practice and there are also bilateral arrangements in place with a number of Asia-pacific countries and the USA to maintain the integrity of the program. These arrangements help the ASOs and Air Marshalls from these countries

to operate in and out of the respective countries.

If there is an ASO on board an aircraft, does that mean the flight is in danger or under threat?

MG: No and it's important to note that our officers are deployed as part of an ongoing deterrence strategy using a model based on risk assessment. They are highly skilled and trained to minimise danger to passengers if they are required to take action on a flight. The officers undergo regular training and re-qualification to maintain their skills at the highest standard. Passengers won't know if there is an ASO on their flight.

Why won't travellers know?

MG: ASOs may be on any flight at any time and the integrity of the program relies on our officers blending in with other travellers. The number of officers deployed, the number of flights covered and the destination of flights covered is classified information in the interest of public safety.

How do you choose which flights you send ASOs on?

There are a range of information sources that feed into the decision-making process. As I previously mentioned, we send our officers on flights in response to threat assessments and as a deterrence strategy.

Over the past 12 months, the AFP has worked with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation to develop a tool that collates and analyses all information to

provide us qualitative and quantitative data on which to base our decisions.

So how do ASOs make the flight safer?

MG: ASOs are trained to respond according to the level of threat. This means they won't use force or tactics that are disproportionate to the situation. They will only escalate their response after other methods, such as negotiation, have been tried.

Are ASOs armed?

Yes they are. However, ASOs are highly trained in negotiation skills and defensive tactics, and the use of firearms is always employed as a last resort.

Why does Australia need ASOs?

MG: The aviation security sector uses a layered security approach. This is a system that recognises the overall risk in an airport environment will be significantly reduced as the number of security layers increases. These layers cover a range of things such as parking restrictions near terminals, airline check-in procedures and detection and screening equipment within the aviation environment.

The AFP's presence at airports, the airline and airport security procedures, and the policies of Government agencies like the Civil Aviation Safety Authority and the Department of Infrastructure, provide crucial layers for aviation security. The final layer of security is the air security officer. All of these layers result in a combined effort to ensure that the skies are safe for all Australians.