

High State of Security

By John Dickerson

In these troubled times, we must be mindful of the need to be vigilant and prepared for all contingencies. To be prepared is not just a Boy Scout motto, but also something we should follow in our every day life. You never know! Here is a true example.

In 1969 the testing of the SST Concorde aircraft was in full swing in Toulouse, France -- a joint venture of Air France and British Airways. This supersonic aircraft would be able to break the sound barrier and make the Europe-United States trip in about three hours. If you factor in the time zone change you could complete the flight one hour before you started! Truly fodder for the cocktail hour circuit.

There were, however, a few matters of concern for the non- flying public, namely noise and the sonic boom sensation. After exhaustive testing and many government tests, the SST was declared safe for commercial operations. The matter of noise and the sonic boom problem were treated lightly and the two airlines agreed not to go past MACH 1, except over the ocean, where the sonic boom would not create a people problem. No discussions were held with the fish.

The use of the Paris or London to New York routes was ignored for some time as the aircraft were scheduled to South America or Bahrain. A truly nice trip, but limited as to the number of potential passengers who would pay a high premium for the experience.

The pressure for New York's JFK destination was building, and the 7,000,000 area residents were less than positive to have the aircraft. Actually, that is a rather tepid evaluation of the mood.

The best part of this story is that I was at JFK in the '70s and got to see the story truly unfold. Here is a little background about the place. This airport grew at an astounding rate after the advent of jet aircraft in 1952 and international travel mushroomed. By the 1970s all facilities were jammed as growth outran new construction. Particularly hard pressed were the roads and parking lots.

The residents near the airport began to organize opposition to the monster called the SST. Newspapers, political forums and picketing were the first steps of opposition. For me, it wasn't so much of a problem. I lived in New Jersey 23 miles away! These efforts did not produce enough public pressure and a new tactic developed -- the drive-by motorcades.

The threat of a 400 -car motorcade at funeral procession speeds through the airport during the peak period was definitely a problem. Since most of them would occur on a Saturday or Sunday, it would not interfere with my 9-5-weekday work schedule. They did ruin our social life, even though Alice joined me several times for a day at the airport. By the end of the summer, however, it was clear that the SST would come to JFK.

The high paycheck types in our main office had been following our weekend shows with the motorcades and called us in for a planning session (idea exchange or something like that). Our normal contingent of police officers on the designated SST arrival day was 34 officers. Estimates of demonstrators, from unknown sources, but probably important people, were awesome.

After 2 hours of hard listening, we came up with a "suggested staffing increase of 97 police officers" to handle the crowd for the morning inaugural landing.

Early in the morning we lined the entry roads, perimeter fencing, and other key areas with our deterrent force. The aircraft landed without incident at 9:00 AM, and our planning paid off. If you had been there with me, you would have seen a miracle of highly effective main office crowd control.

Our 34 assigned officers and the 97 extras, greeted three young kids riding their bikes into the airport to see the SST, and not a protester in sight!

We were not questioned about the staffing.