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Flight-emergency course takes off as execs sign up

Program shows how to respond to hijackings; airlines wary

BY ANDREW MARKS

On a recent Friday afternoon in Manhattan, Scott Bach, a corporate lawyer with his own practice in midtown, faced a daunting situation.

A terrorist was threatening a flight attendant with a knife, forcing Mr. Bach to make a snap decision about what to do.

Fortunately, Mr. Bach, who up until Sept. 11 used to fly frequently for business, was not in a plane 30,000 feet in the air. Instead, he was at the Wings Club in Manhattan, participating in a new flight training program geared to helping traveling executives respond to terrorist situations.

A trainer from Flight Watch America Inc.'s defensive flying program was standing nearby to advise Mr. Bach how to react in this situation. "He reminded us to be aware that the attack on the stewardess could be a distraction while someone else was trying to get into the cockpit," recalls Mr. Bach.

This hair-raising exercise may sound like a frequent flyer's worst nightmare, but for Mr. Bach and 30 other executives from companies participating in the course, it was an important step toward feeling prepared for these situations.

"I don't want to feel like a helpless victim every time I step on a plane. I want to know what I can and should do," says Mr. Bach.

That's exactly what businessman Don Detrich had in mind when he created Flight Watch America, a San Francisco-based company that held a course in New York to teach frequent travelers how to handle in-flight situations, from unruly passengers to a terrorist hijacking.

"People have no idea how to respond to air problems like an emergency landing, much less a hijacking, and we give them the basic training to handle these situations," says Mr. Detrich, who formerly owned a technology staffing company.

Training, for a fee

Certainly, businesspeople are willing to pay for it. The four-hour course costs \$250, or \$100 per person to train 100 or more employees from a single organization.

But as Flight Watch America takes off, the airline industry and professional pilots are wary of the implications of training passengers to be amateur flight marshals.

"The airlines have been saying all along that everyone should be more aware of what's going on around them when they board an



LESS FEAR: Flight Watch America training helped corporate lawyer Scott Bach.

BUCK ENNIS

airplane, but there's a line here that shouldn't be crossed in terms of how much passengers should be expected to do and how much they believe they're able to do," cautions a spokesman for the Air Transport Association of America, a trade group for airlines headquartered in the United States. "The worst thing that can happen is to foster an atmosphere of vigilantism in the sky."

Mr. Detrich argues that his program does not encourage vigilantism, and in fact does exactly the opposite.

"If the airlines would send people to see what we teach, they wouldn't worry about our training," says Mr. Detrich, who has invited several major airlines to participate in or observe Flight Watch America's program, but to no avail.

"We don't tell people to take the law into their own hands, but how they can best help the professionals flying the plane," he explains. "The best way to assure that people respond in an appropriate manner is to offer some kind of training so they know what is appropriate."

The Association of Flight Attendants did send an observer to assess the defensive flying program. A spokeswoman says the union cautiously agrees with Mr. Detrich. "Since 9/11, people are pretty geared up to act—no one wants to be a victim of such a horrible incident. We feel that if people are going to try to do something, it's better that they have some training," she says.

By all accounts, the defensive flying course is a hit with the 300 or so people—mostly business travelers—who have signed up since February.

In June, 80 executives at Marathon Ashland Petroleum, based in Finley, Ohio, took the flight emergency course, and Mr.

Detrich says that several more companies are interested.

Positive experience

Steve Bandy, Marathon Ashland's safety director, says it was a positive and eye-opening experience for the executives who attended the program. "People said it really helped them by showing them what to look for, how to help the attendants and how to protect themselves," he says.

But did the course convince Mr. Bach to fly more often? Probably not, he says.

"I will still fly only when I absolutely have to, but the next time I get on a plane, I'm going to feel a lot more comfortable and confident, and that's a much better feeling than fear. I recommend it to anyone who flies," he says. ■

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