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TSA Wants Access to Veterans' Files to Add 'Mental Defectives' to Watch List

By Jeff Stein, National Security Editor

Is there an efficient, legal way to keep crazy people off airplanes altogether, like the manic depressive man shot dead at the Miami airport last week?

As it turns out, the government was taking steps in that direction almost a month before Rigoberto Alpizar was plugged by U.S. air marshals after he ran down the Jetway with a bundle in his hands while saying, according to the government, that he had a bomb.

A Nov. 15 notice put out by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), which is always thinking about new ways to keep potentially dangerous people off our airliners, states TSA is looking for contractors to add a number of new databases for screening passengers and airport workers.

Up first are the files of the Defense Department (DoD) and Veterans Administration (VA), which the TSA says it wants scoured for "mental defectives."

As if troubled veterans didn't have enough to worry about. According to a 2004 Government Accountability Office (GAO) study, about 15 percent of the soldiers coming home from the intense guerrilla wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are likely to be afflicted with what was once called "combat fatigue."

The New England Journal of Medicine also reported in 2004 that "15.6 percent to 17.1 percent of returning soldiers from Iraq exhibited signs of anxiety, major depression or other mental health problems."

Today those symptoms are lumped together in what's called post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, which afflicted hundreds of thousands of soldiers who came home from Vietnam combat with "a thousand-yard stare" and fell into depression, suicide, alcoholism and drug abuse.

One of them might be sitting next to you on an airplane: More than half, or 53 percent, of the 1 million combat veterans of Vietnam were afflicted to one degree or another, said a four-year, \$9 million study published by the VA in 1990.

And the trend line for the new generation of veterans is going north. The number who sought help for depression at VA clinics in 2004 grew tenfold over the year before, according to the Los Angeles Times.

“In all, 23 percent of Iraq veterans treated at VA facilities have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder,” it said. The VA is struggling to keep up with services for the troubled veterans, GAO said, thus exiling many to the streets, where they could be walking time bombs.

Secret Codes

The military services used to put a secret code for “mental disorders” on veterans’ discharge papers until the practice was exposed and banned in 1974. As it turned out, the numbers weren’t secret at all to potential employers and others who knew how to decipher them.

Maybe now they won’t be secret to the airlines and the TSA, either.

But one puzzling aspect of the TSA’s plan is that DoD and the VA may not even have a classification for vets who are “mental defectives.”

A VA spokeswoman who has worked at the agency for 22 years said she had never heard of such a category, but she didn’t want her name used until she could make a thorough inquiry.

DoD spokeswoman Lt. Col. Ellen G. Krenke flatly declared, “There is no such category” in military records. But, she added by e-mail, “The only area where information such as this may be contained is in the section for standard separation program designator codes. However . . . this information is stamped ‘For Official Use Only’ and will not be furnished to any agency or individual outside the Department of Defense.”

David Addlestone, an Air Force judge advocate from 1966 to 1968 and author of “The Rights of Veterans,” said that years ago the armed services had a “personality disorder discharge” for people who couldn’t adjust to military life, but he said he wasn’t sure it still existed.

Yet the TSA notice, called a “sources sought” inquiry and first reported by Government Security News, reads: “Examples of new data sources would be DoD files for military service histories or VA files for lists of persons who have been declared mental defectives.”

TSA spokesman Darrin Kayser did not have an immediate explanation for the apparent contradiction late Friday but said he would look into it.

The prospect of a return of secret codes that could amount to a blanket flight ban against troubled veterans upsets John Terzano, vice president of the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation.

If it’s true, Terzano said, “This is a really, really shameful thing. Veterans do get traumatized by war, of course. But for all their pain and sacrifice, to have the government looking over their shoulder and putting their names in a database is unconscionable.”

For TSA data-hunters, though, it's just the beginning.

"We plan to add two new data sources per year," its notice said.

Backchannel Chatter

Speaking of watch lists, the FBI quietly announced via the Federal Register on Dec. 2 that it was putting the Terrorist Screening Records System beyond the reach of the Freedom of Information Act.

The "exemptions are necessary to avoid interference with the law enforcement, intelligence, and counterterrorism functions and responsibilities of the FBI and the Terrorist Screening Center," the Justice Department said in its "final" notice, a response to comments invited from the public about the proposed rule. David Sobel, general counsel of the Electronic Privacy Information Center, a civil liberties advocate in Washington, said, "Most of [it] is devoted to debunking the arguments we made in our comments." . . . Elsewhere in Justice, 493 terrorism-related cases were referred to the department for prosecution from 2002 to 2004, 167 were prosecuted, and 95 convictions were won, according to numbers assembled from the department by TRAC, the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, also in Washington. Of those, 73 people were sentenced to prison for an average of 38 months. The median term was 12 months, according to the numbers . . . Just in time: a conference on "Intelligence and Ethics," at the Joint Services Conference on Professional Ethics, Jan. 27-28. "It is the goal of this conference to establish the first international meeting of civilian and military intelligence professionals, educators and those with academic perspectives in national security, philosophy, law, history, psychology, theology and human rights," an announcement said.

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