

WEAPONS STILL FLY AT AIRPORTS

News boards 14 jets with contraband despite security push

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Carry-on bags concealing potentially deadly weapons. Six major airlines. Eleven airports. Fourteen flights. And not once did anyone catch on. To test the supposedly more stringent security imposed at the nation's airports after the Sept. 11 attacks, Daily News reporters boarded flights over the Labor Day weekend carrying contraband - including box cutters, razor knives and pepper spray. Not a single airport security checkpoint spotted or confiscated any of the dangerous items, all of which have been banned from airports and planes by federal authorities. The four airports where the Sept. 11 terrorists boarded planes - Newark International, Boston's Logan Airport, Washington's Dulles International and Portland International Jetport in Maine - were all breached during The News' undercover investigation. Kennedy and LaGuardia airports also failed, as did major international hubs in Los Angeles, Chicago and Las Vegas. Smaller commuter depots weren't immune either, with Fort Lauderdale and Santa Barbara, Calif., flunking. "That is really disturbing. It's actually beyond disturbing," said Harvey Kushner, an expert in terrorism and airport security and chairman of the department of criminal justice at Long Island University. "It scares the hell out of me," said Kushner, who runs the security company Safer America and was waiting for a flight yesterday at Kennedy. "But it is not surprising. It underlines the massive problem that we have at our airports.

" Same old slipups The News' findings were almost identical to the results of a probe the paper conducted less than a month after the terrorist attacks, during which reporters got past checkpoints with dangerous items at 10 airports. This time, The News found that the airports had implemented a range of security procedures since the attacks last year. Guards consistently checked photo identification, sent luggage through souped-up X-ray machines, examined carry-on bags, wanded passengers with hand-held metal detectors and made many remove their shoes. But it amounted to nothing more than a big show. The new measures failed to spot the contraband items in The News' bags because of technological and human errors. Some of the most glaring: A security agent at Newark insisted on passing our bag through an X-ray machine twice after spotting a tape recorder, cell phone, two-way pager and radio inside. She remarked: "You're pretty loaded up.

" It was 5 a.

m. Few others were on line. But she never opened our bag - and had no idea she missed a rubber-handled razor knife and box cutter. At Portland, two guards painstakingly picked through a reporter's laptop computer case and purse as other passengers filed onto a jet scheduled to depart for Boston at 1:50 p.

m. When one of the guards came across a matchbook in one of the bags, he said we had to carry it in a jacket pocket. Neither of them found our rubber-handled razor knife. At Santa Barbara, a ticketing agent escorted us to a security checkpoint around 4:40 a.

m. We had been randomly selected to have our check-in and carry-on luggage searched. On the way, the agent joked: "You haven't taken any flying lessons recently, have you?"

" The utility knife in our carry-on would not be discovered - despite X-ray and hand searches. None of the instruments The News carried are illegal to possess outside airports. Continued on next page Continued from previous page However, most of the items are similar to those used by the Sept. 11 terrorists - and the Transportation Security Administration has banned them from secure areas of the airports and flights. 'Lot of work to do' Federal officials - when told of The News findings - said they had inherited a broken system that they're busy fixing. "We have a lot of work to do," said Leonardo Alcivar, a spokesman for Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta, who oversees the agency. He insisted security has improved, pointing out that on any given day, the aviation system securely processes 5 million passengers. The nation's airports are working to meet a Nov. 19 deadline for federally training security screeners. The airports tested by The News relied on a combination of federal screeners, private companies and local and state police. In Los Angeles, a bicycle cop was peddling through the terminal. On eight of the trips, News reporters were flagged as security risks - apparently because we had bought one-way tickets days before departing. The designation typically meant the luggage we checked in was X-rayed or hand-searched and our carry-on bags were examined by hand at the gate. But none of the agents who searched the luggage found the dangerous items. Slapdash searches During these random bag checks, agents typically peeked inside the bags, not bothering to unzip every pocket or remove all the items. "All righty, you can get on the plane," a guard in Chicago told us after he finished a search that lasted little more than a minute. He missed a box cutter and a rubber-handled razor knife. The airports and airlines tested by The News did not return calls or referred questions to federal authorities. United Airlines also delivered a warning through spokeswoman Chris Nardella: "That is a violation of federal law that you guys knowingly took those items on an airline. You can be arrested.

" George Naccara, federal security director at Logan International Airport, where The News slipped by checkpoints with a rubber-handled razor knife and corkscrew, said: "What you told me is troubling. Absolutely.

" Naccara said razors are generally "very difficult to detect.

" But he added none of the items carried by The News would be considered "deadly or dangerous.

" He said the two areas at Logan breached by The News are still staffed by nonfederal employees. The security at Boston, Washington and Portland appeared to be more diligent than

at the other airports, although they did no better in spotting the contraband. Trying harder At those three airports, guards X-rayed and unpacked most of our bags. But they still overlooked rubber-handled razor knives, a box cutter and a corkscrew. Also, the random bag checks did not appear all that random on many of the flights. Before boarding, guards at several airports chose to search at least one passenger who appeared to be of Middle Eastern or South Asian descent. The News also discovered that security employees appeared less diligent when searching our carry-on bags if we were cooperative and friendly - or demonstrated a familiarity with their routine. At Los Angeles, a guard stopped his search a few moments after we pulled a two-way pager from our carry-on and showed him that it actually worked. "You're used to this," the guard said. He wanded us with a hand-held metal detector and then added: "Have a good flight.

" SIDEBAR EVERYTHING GOT THROUGH To test airport security, the Daily News took 14 flights over the Labor Day weekend. Security agents never spotted the contraband in our bags. Here are the flights: FRIDAY, AUG. 30 6 a.

m. Route: LaGuardia Airport to Boston's Logan Airport Flight: Delta Air Lines Flight 2180 In carry-on bag: pepper spray Security measures: Check-in luggage flagged for hand search. Carry-on bags X-rayed. 7 a.

m. Route: Newark Airport to Washington's Dulles Airport Flight: Continental Airlines Flight 3861 In carry-on bag: box cutter and rubber-handled razor knife Security measures: Carry-on bag X-rayed twice 9:40 a.

m. Route: Boston to Portland International Jetport in Maine Flight: American Airlines Flight 4567* In carry-on bag: rubber-handled razor knife Security measures: Check-in bag flagged for X-ray, carry-on bag X-rayed and then hand-searched at gate. 12:55 p.

m. Route: Washington to Chicago's O'Hare International Airport Flight: United Airlines Flight 923 In carry-on bag: box cutter and rubber-handled razor knife Security measures: Check-in bag flagged for X-ray, carry-on bag X-rayed and hand-searched at gate. 1:50 p.

m. Route: Portland to Boston Flight: Delta Air Lines Flight 6139* In carry-on bag: rubber-handled razor knife Security measures: Carry-on bag X-rayed, then flagged and hand-searched at gate. 5 p.

m. Route: Chicago to Los Angeles International Airport Flight: United Airlines Flight 115 In carry-on bag: rubber-handled razor knife and box cutter Security measures: Check-in bag flagged for X-ray, carry-on bag X-rayed and hand-searched at gate. Reporter asked to remove shoes. 6:45 p.

m. Route: Boston to Washington Flight: United Airlines Flight 1697 In carry-on bag: corkscrew Security measures: Carry-on bag X-rayed, then hand-searched at checkpoint. 10:55 p.

m. Route: Los Angeles to Santa Barbara, Calif. Flight: American Airlines Flight 3237* In carry-on bag: rubber-handled razor knife Security measures: Carry-on bag X-rayed, then hand-

searched at checkpoint. Bag flagged at gate for hand search. SATURDAY, AUG. 31 9:10 a.

m. Route: Washington to JFK Airport Flight: United Airlines Flight 7382* In carry-on bag: rubber-handled razor knife Security measures: Carry-on bag X-rayed twice. 1:05 p.

m. Route: JFK to Ft. Lauderdale Hollywood International Airport Flight: JetBlue Airways Flight 69 In carry-on bag: rubber-handled razor knife Security measures: Carry-on bag X-rayed. 9 p.

m. Route: Ft. Lauderdale to JFK Flight: JetBlue Airways Flight 50 In carry-on bag: rubber-handled razor knife and corkscrew Security measures: Carry-on bag X-rayed. SUNDAY, SEPT. 1 5:15 a.

m. Route: Santa Barbara to Los Angeles Flight: United Airlines Flight 5782 In carry-on bag: utility knife Security measures: Check-in bag hand-searched and tested for explosives. Carry-on bag X-rayed, then hand-searched. 7:40 a.

m. Route: Los Angeles to Las Vegas McCarran International Airport Flight: America West Airlines Flight 50 In carry-on bag: rubber-handled razor knife and razor blades Security measures: Check-in bag flagged for X-ray. Carry-on bag X-rayed and hand-searched. 3:45 p.

m. Route: Las Vegas to Newark Flight: Continental Airlines Flight 1669 In carry-on bag: rubber-handled razor knife, razor blades and pocket knife Security measures: Carry-on bag X-rayed, then hand-searched. *Indicates flight handled by a smaller carrier in cooperation with the carrier listed.