Cameron on Transportation: TSA Screening: 'You Can Have It Fast, Good or Cheap. Pick Two.'

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By JIM CAMERON

Who do you think has the toughest job in the transportation business? Long-haul truckers? Highway crews? Metro-North engineers?

While all of those folks certainly pay their dues, to me the toughest job in transportation is being a TSA agent.

It has been 15 years since 9/11 and the formation of the Transportation Security Administration, creating a

standardized, federal version of the previously private security screening agents. The rules on what is allowed on planes have certainly changed with time.

A couple of years ago, the TSA said small scissors and nail clippers would be allowed in carry-on bags, after an earlier ban. People freaked, though the plastic knives distributed with snack packs are already sharp enough to slit a throat. By not having to worry about such tiny tools, TSA agents should be able to spend more time looking for the really dangerous weapons.

How about ceramic knives, not found by metal detectors? That's why the TSA spent more than $2 billion for full-body scanners. Controversial as they may be, they seem efficient.

Liquid explosives are frighteningly effective, which is why you should always drain your carry-on water bottle before joining the TSA line. Free refills are available at the water fountains after clearing security.

The spring saw numerous complaints about the long lines at TSA checkpoints, a situation since resolved with better staffing and a new director of the agency.

A combination of increased passenger counts and TSA staffing seemed responsible for the delays.

But therein lies the reason I think TSA agents have such a tough job: The public wants 100 percent security but with no time-consuming, privacy-invading pat-downs or delays. Sorry folks. As the old adage says "You can have it fast, good or cheap. ... Pick two."

Thanks, Not Curses

The TSA has 47,000 agents screening nearly 2 million passengers a day. It's not a glamorous job (starting salary is $26,000 a year), just a crucial one. Yes, those agents do fail regular testing of their skills, allowing dummy knives and liquids to get by in the haste of doing their high-pressure job.

But the stuff they find is astounding. In an edition of its weekly blog, the TSA recounts confiscating 58 firearms, 48 of them loaded and 17 having rounds in the chamber, along with dozens of knives, swords and hidden weapons. And you wonder why the screening line slows down?

On a recent trip, I saw a passenger literally curse at a TSA agent for doing her job. The agent kept her cool and didn't yank the passenger out of line for a retaliatory body cavity search, but maybe she should have. Could you be so patient as to not respond to such insults when you are only trying to keep passengers, even that idiot, safe?

When my carry-on bags get a secondary screening, I'm happy. My bags carry so many weird electronics, they had better screen me. After the agent finishes, I say, "Thanks for your diligence."

If you want to fly, my advice is to shut up. Let the agents do their job. Help them by following directions: shoes off, laptops out, pockets empty. Or register for TSA pre-check, a great screening time-saver (you can

leave your shoes on).

But please let the TSA agents do their job. Asking them to hustle because you're late for your flight is inviting them to make a mistake that might cost thousands of lives.

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