

Eyewitnesses refute official story in fatal shooting of passenger at Miami airport

Kate Randall

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In the days since Rigoberto Alpizar was shot and killed while fleeing an American Airlines flight in Miami, no credible evidence has materialized to back the claim by government authorities that the 44-year-old Costa Rican immigrant said he was carrying a bomb in the moments before federal marshals opened fire.

Alpizar was shot dead on Wednesday by air marshals in the jetway of AA Flight 757 after exiting the aircraft. Law enforcement agents blew up Alpizar's luggage on the tarmac, confirming he was carrying no explosives or other weapons. (See: "Miami airplane shooting: Washington's 'war on terrorism' comes home").

The official version of events, promoted by the Bush administration and the media in the immediate aftermath, is that this state killing of an innocent man was justified by the "war on terror." The central assertion to back up this claim is that Alpizar said he had a bomb, and that this posed a terrorist threat. Dave Adams, a spokesman for the Federal Air Marshal Service, explicitly told the press that Alpizar had "run up and down the aisle yelling, 'I have a bomb in my bag.' "

However, no witnesses—including from among the more than 100 passengers and crew members on board the flight—have come forward publicly to back up this allegation. Instead, numerous passengers have directly contradicted it, even after hours of interrogation and prodding by police authorities in the wake of the shooting.

Witnesses to the killing relate that the extremely agitated man attempted to get off the flight, followed by his wife, who called out that her husband was sick and had not taken his medication. Alpizar's wife, Anne Buechner, has since said that her husband suffered from bipolar disorder (or manic depression) and had not

recently taken his medication.

Passenger Alan Tirpak, 31, who was seated near the front of the aircraft, told the *New York Daily News*, "He didn't say anything as far as I could hear." Tirpak said he heard the man's wife yelling to the marshals that he was "very sick," before hearing shots ring out outside the plane's door.

Another passenger, Mary Gardner, told Associated Press, "I did not hear him say that he had a bomb." She also said she heard Mrs. Buechner say of her husband, "He's bipolar. He doesn't have his medicine."

The *Orlando Sentinel* interviewed seven passengers who said Alpizar was silent as he bolted past them. "One thought he had taken the wrong flight. Another thought he was going to throw up," the *Sentinel* reported.

Jorge A. Borrelli, an Orlando architect, stated, "I can tell you, he never said a thing in that airplane. He never called out he had a bomb. He never said a word from the point he passed me at Row 9.... He did not say a word to anybody."

Borrelli said that Alpizar's wife tried to reach her husband: "She was saying, 'My husband's sick. He's sick. He's bipolar. He didn't take his medicine. It was my fault. I made him get on the plane. You know, we just came from a medical mission. Oh, my God! They've killed my husband!'"

Jorge Figueroa, a power-plant operator seated a few rows behind first class, told the *Sentinel*, "He wasn't saying anything; he was just running. I said to myself, 'It is probably a person who took the wrong plane.' "

Two teenagers seated in Row 26 concurred that Alpizar had said nothing as he ran down the aisle.

John McAlhany, 44, was seated near Alpizar and his wife toward the rear of the plane when the incident unfolded. He told the *Daily News*, "There was no bomb

threat. I never heard anything about a bomb.” McAlhany added, “I heard him saying to his wife, ‘I’ve got to get off the plane.’ He bumped me, bumped a couple of stewardesses. He just wanted to get off the plane.”

The treatment of the plane’s passengers following the shooting was of a piece with the violence meted out to Alpizar. Armed federal marshals and police agents stormed the aircraft and ordered them to put their hands on their heads. Terrified passengers were told to remain motionless for more than an hour, and some reported having guns put to the backs of their heads.

After they were taken off the plane, with their hands still on their heads, they were questioned for hours by police officials, including officers from the Miami-Dade police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The last passenger was not released until nine hours after the event.

Despite the fact that no evidence had been found to indicate Alpizar’s actions had anything to do with terrorism, the passengers were grilled about whether they had heard him speak of a bomb. Anne Buechner, whose husband of 18 years had just been shot down in cold blood, was also questioned for hours before being released.

McAlhany, interviewed by AP, said, “The first time I heard the word ‘bomb’ was when I was interviewed by the FBI. They kept asking if I heard him say the B-word. And I said, ‘What is the B-word?’ And they were like, ‘Bomb.’ I said no. They said, ‘Are you sure?’ And I am.”

It is significant that after nine hours of such questioning, no one has come forward to corroborate the Federal Air Marshal Service’s claim that Alpizar said he had a bomb. The obvious explanation is that the entire bomb threat story is a lie, most likely invented by the perpetrators immediately after the shooting to provide themselves with an alibi.

This lack of evidence, however, has not deterred the federal authorities and the Bush administration from praising the performance of the marshals. On the contrary, in the immediate aftermath of the state killing—and before any investigation into the incident—White House spokesman Scott McClellan commented, “These marshals appear to have acted in a way that’s consistent with the extensive training that they have received.”

Air marshals spokesman Dave Adams commented on the shooting, “In this situation here, this was textbook,” because the marshals believed there was “an imminent threat of death or serious physical injury.”

Neither the Bush administration nor the Federal Air Marshal Service has offered condolences or an apology to Alpizar’s family. In fact, the general consensus, among both federal authorities and the media, is that the gruesome episode proves that after the long wait since the September 11 attacks, the “war on terror” is “working”—someone has finally been killed. Television broadcasts reported the shooting with an air of satisfaction—and the fantastic claim that passengers would now feel safer when they flew!

The incident has shown that the thousands of federal marshals riding on US aircraft operate under a shoot-to-kill policy. John Amat, national operations vice president of the Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association, who is also a deputy with the US Marshals Service in Miami, said that shooting to maim or injure is not an option in such situations: “The person was screaming, saying he would blow up the plane, reaching into his bag—they had to react.”

Alpizar’s family has not bought the authorities’ justifications for his death. In a telephone interview from Costa Rica with the *Orlando Sentinel*, his brother Carlos Alpizar said, “With all the advances that the US has supposedly made in the war against terrorism, I can’t conceive that the marshals wouldn’t be able to overpower an unarmed, single man, especially knowing he had already cleared every security check.”

He added, “I will never accept that it was necessary to kill him as if he was some dangerous criminal. And I want to make this distinction: He did not die. He was killed.”



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