

**SAFETY SITE**  
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**SAFETY IN AIRPORTS**

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**Know the Terrain, Assess the Risks**

From a security perspective, an airport is divided into two kinds of areas—the sterile and non-sterile areas. The sterile area is where access is controlled, such as the part of the passenger terminal that's inside of security screening, or the outdoor areas inside of fenced checkpoints, such as the aircraft ramp or baggage sorting stations. The non-sterile area is anywhere that access is uncontrolled, such as the passenger loading and unloading zone outside the terminal, baggage claim, the ticket counters, and the security queue.

While it's tempting for people to think about airports as “high security” environments, the truth is that there are vast differences between the security afforded in sterile and non-sterile areas. In the non-sterile areas, the public can come and go at will, and bring anything they want into the area with little fear of detection. For example, it's easy to drive a car full of explosives right up to the curb (as an attacker planned to do at Los Angeles International Airport, on 1 January 2000, before he was caught at the Canadian border a few weeks prior to the attack), or walk into the ticketing or baggage claim areas with hidden weapons (as an attacker did at the EI AI ticket counter at Los Angeles International Airport, in July 2002). The lack of a significant police presence in many non-sterile areas even permits an individual to penetrate far into the airport environment with openly carried weapons, as we saw in the November 2013 Los Angeles International Airport attack, where the attacker shot his way past the security checkpoint with a rifle before he finally encountered the police.

The sterile areas are not immune from attack, but the likelihood of an armed attack is reduced because screening protocols make it more difficult to reach, because fences, gates and checkpoints must first be breached, raising the possibility that the attacker will be caught or an alarm will be sounded.

This is not necessarily the deterrent that you might think it is, because an attacker can easily breach the boundary, penetrate into the environment, and hit the target before armed responders can confront him, even if an alarm is promptly initiated. armed security confronted him. Similarly, attackers can easily crash a service gate or drive through a vehicle checkpoint without stopping, drive onto the ramp, and launch an attack on aircraft or the terminal before they are intercepted. If suitable uniforms, credentials, and marked vehicles are used (all easily obtainable through theft or forgery), then attackers may not be detected at all before they strike.

While an attack within the sterile area is less likely than an attack in the non-sterile area, either is entirely possible. As a result, you need to maintain a good level of awareness when you are at the airport, no matter where you are.

When you're in the sterile side of the transition zone, you need to be alert for the same reasons. You are transiting from an area with a higher level of security to one that may not be secured at all, so you need to make a conscious effort to increase your level of awareness as you enter this higher threat area. Pay even closer attention to the people in your environment, and what they are doing. Look around for the things in your environment that pose a potential threat, such as the unattended

suitcase near the door, the unattended car at the curb, or the guy with the rifle walking through the door.

### **Escape Paths**

Since it's important to control public access to certain areas in the airport environment, there are many doors that are either locked or alarmed. There are also many areas that are simply posted as "off limits" to the public, without much to actually block your entry.

Because it would be problematic for us to violate these boundaries in normal circumstances, there's a tendency to dismiss and ignore them as viable escape paths when danger arises. We need to guard against this tendency and force ourselves to consider all of these possibilities when the need arises.

For example, if an attack happens while you're in the sterile area of the terminal, don't hesitate to exit through alarmed doors that lead to service areas or the ramp. Don't hesitate to enter a jet way door that's open (the airplane at the end can become a "lifeboat," or you can run out onto the ramp) or hop the counter of a restaurant so you can exit out through the kitchen and service hallways.

If you're in the baggage claim area, you can run outside through traditional exits, but you can also go through the curtains where the conveyor belts bring your luggage in from outside, or you can run back into the sterile area of the terminal through the exit lane. If you're near the ticket counters, you can hop them and follow the conveyor belt to flee through the service areas behind the counter.

Some doors may require an airport badge or passcode to open. Encourage airport employees (gate agents, wheelchair pushers, restaurant workers, etc.) to open them for you and follow you outside to safety if they seem hesitant to do so. If necessary, take the airport badge of a fallen casualty, so you can swipe open electronic locks yourself.

Following these tips will certainly violate security protocols, but that's the least of your concerns in an "active shooter" or terror attack. In the 2013 attack in Los Angeles, thousands of passengers fled outside onto the aircraft ramp from the terminals (even from adjacent, but unaffected terminals), and it took the better part of the day to round everyone up, rescreen them, and re-secure the airport so that flight operations could resume. Some passengers who fled outside even made it to the fence line at the far end of the airfield, crossing active taxiways and runways in the process! It was a huge mess and inconvenience for security personnel, but the important point is this—none of those passengers who violated security protocols got shot by the bad guy. The best way to avoid getting shot is to not be there, after all.

*Courtesy of Mike Wood,*

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