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Yes, there was a viable liquid bomb plot

**Jury gives bomb makers benefit of doubt on target**

By [Lewis Page](#)

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So the verdicts are in - or not in. The "liquid bomb" plot trial is at least on hold, possibly finished altogether.

A British jury has decided that three men are guilty of conspiracy to murder and cause explosions, but refused to convict them of conspiring to blow up airliners in flight. A further four men have pled guilty to conspiring to cause a public nuisance, and the jury declined to convict them on murder or blowing-up-aircraft charges. These other four were never charged with conspiracy to cause explosions, never having been conclusively linked to bomb manufacture. A further defendant was found not guilty on all charges.

A lot of people will see these verdicts as proof that the "liquid bomb" airliner plot was never feasible. Sure, some of the accused were planning to cause explosions - they have admitted as much, saying they intended to let off a small bomb inside a Heathrow terminal as a political statement. But they say they never wanted to wreck planes in flight, killing innocents by the hundred. As they hadn't booked any tickets when they were arrested, a sufficiency of jury members believed they deserved the benefit of the doubt. The prosecution failed to show that their bombs were definitely intended for use aboard airliners.

Could the bombs have done that job, in fact?

The answer, unusually, is yes. The three convicted bombmakers - unlike [other UK-based terrorists](#) ([http://www.theregister.co.uk/2007/07/02/terror\\_idiocy\\_outbreak/](http://www.theregister.co.uk/2007/07/02/terror_idiocy_outbreak/)) seen recently - had everything ready to assemble devices which would have had a good chance of getting through airport security as it then was. These devices would then have had enough power to at the very least severely damage a big jet.

There was no intention, as was first suggested, to [mix up big charges of TATP in airliner lavatories](#) ([http://www.theregister.co.uk/2006/08/17/flying\\_toilet\\_terror\\_labs/](http://www.theregister.co.uk/2006/08/17/flying_toilet_terror_labs/)), which would indeed have been impractical and foolish. Rather, the bombs' main charges would have consisted of a fairly safe, fairly inert liquid prepared before ever going to the airport - specifically hydrogen peroxide and Tang, put inside plastic drinks bottles with seals unbroken.

The men planned to keep the main charges separate from the detonators until just before explosion time, like good professionals. Concentrating hydrogen peroxide to a useful level from the stuff they sell for emblondening your hair is mildly hazardous, but only mildly - it won't detonate on its own. Once made and mixed, sealed up in a reasonably good pressure container like a plastic drinks bottle, it is acceptably stable. It'd take you a few tries to get the proportions right - just as it did the government boffins working for the prosecution, and Dr Sidney Alford working for Channel 4 - but once you know the recipe you can get reliable results. Carrying this sort of stuff about is no more dangerous than carrying a similar bottle of petrol: not something you'd make a lifelong habit of, but

fine for a combat operation.

The detonators would have consisted of AA battery cases, emptied out and filled with hexamethylenetriperoxidediamine - HMTD. The bombmakers had hollowed-out batteries ready, and all the ingredients for making HMTD. Unlike the liquid main charges, the detonators - just like proper military ones - would explode properly if subjected to a good jolt of electricity or heat, not merely burn. They might also, just like military dets, go off merely from a sharp knock or other disrespect. That's why detonators are kept small, and why you don't put them in contact with the main charge until the last minute.

The bombers' special HMTD-filled batteries would also have contained flashbulb filaments. The intention was to connect these to the flash circuits of a normal camera, well able to deliver a sudden strong pulse of electricity. The camera could also be used to carry the modified battery/det through security.

A very alert airport baggage-scanner operator might spot the modified battery - it would look somewhat different from a normal one under X-ray - but it would be partly concealed by several others and by the case and circuitry of the camera, plus any other metallic items in the bag. The main shape of it - the outer metal case - would look right. The X-ray operator would have to be almost superhuman in alertness and skill to notice it.

Making HMTD and carrying it about is no joke. But, under this plan, you only ever handle small amounts. If you take basic precautions, an accident won't lose you your eyes or hands; won't destroy your car; won't even give you away unless it happens unluckily during the last part of the operation, in the airport or the aircraft.

A sensible bombmaker would always handle a small HMTD det using tongs or something (just as a sensible man doesn't let his fingers touch a normal det any more than he has to, and absolutely never encloses one in his hand). He would always avert his gaze, or wear industrial safety goggles. That way, if the HMTD went off spontaneously, he would get off with no more than superficial injuries and hearing damage.

The forensic-explosives boffins at Fort Halstead prefer to use a robot to handle HMTD, in fact - but they work with explosives every day, and they want to retire uninjured with faculties intact. A man who only has to handle explosives once, and who reckons to die doing so, wouldn't need any robot, nor even any tongs and safety goggles like the backstreet bomb maker. There's always a chance that HMTD will decide to go off for no good reason at all, but it's not that big a chance. Your correspondent, indeed, has heard tales of British policemen nonchalantly driving huge amounts of HMTD - several pounds, enough to destroy a car or gut a building - to Fort Halstead on the motorway back in the pre 9/11 era; only to have the receiving boffins turn pale and hastily evacuate the reception area on being handed the stuff.

So the bombers in this case had adequately safe main charges, and in those pre-liquids-ban days they could have taken quite big ones onto the plane with them. They also had viable detonators, safe enough for suicide terrorists to use if not for normal explosives folk, well able to give the main charges the high-velocity shock they would need to make them detonate rather than deflagrate or burn. All they needed to do in the airliner loos was hook up their dets to the firing circuit, open the bottles, slip the dets in and press the button. Job done.

It's the possession and use of detonators, indeed, that's the hallmark of a serious bomber. The Provisional IRA (PIRA) of old used detonators, both proper manufactured ones and homemade. These were very often the primaries for highly effective home-made charges, which went off quite reliably and caused a lot of destruction. The bombers in this case were serious - not by any means in PIRA's league yet, but getting there - and their plan was a good one. The prosecutors have failed to prove to the jury's satisfaction that the devices were aimed at airliners, but nobody - not even the three convicted bombmakers themselves - suggests that the bombs weren't viable, or that they couldn't have got through security.

There's nothing intrinsically impossible about home-brewing effective bombs out of fairly everyday stuff, remember - other people than PIRA were bound to get wise eventually. And let's be quite clear: acknowledging this reality is not the same as endorsing lengthy detention without charge. It's not the same as saying that battlefield chemical warheads are equivalent to nukes; it's not an argument in support of massive state snooping powers, the use of or connivance at torture, airstrikes against children etc. It's perfectly possible to argue that terrorist bombings aren't, in fact, a significant threat to western society and yet acknowledge that this particular plan was a feasible and dangerous one.

Does the liquids limit prevent this kind of attack? No, not really. It's fairly easy to get round, in fact; a big team of terrorists with boarding passes for many different flights could bring many small amounts of liquid main-charge through security and combine them afterwards, still needing only one detonator, one firing device and one suicide bomber.

But there are no big teams of terrorists in the UK. MI5 says that the average size of a UK terror cell known to them is ten. As a general rule, as soon as you have more than, say, five people in your UK-based jihadi cell, you have probably popped up on the security services' radar in some way - quite likely because you have an informer in your midst. So perhaps the liquid limits are worthwhile, the more so as everyone has now got used to them and the worst of the inconvenience has died down. Personally, I'd still happily fly without them; but I'd never die in a ditch to get rid of them either. Permission to take liquids on planes is scarcely the most important freedom that has lately been taken away from us.

Were the jury idiots, not to send the three bombmakers down on the big airliner charge? Should they have convicted the other four, who had made "martyr" videos but couldn't be positively tied to the bomb factory - the four suicide mules who would have carried the devices, according to the prosecution?

It's only one man's opinion - worth what you paid for it, eg nothing really - but I say no. The bombmakers have been convicted of being bombmakers - they'll go to prison for a long time. The video idiots will do less time, presumably not very much more than they already have awaiting trial. But all of them will be watched for the rest of their lives; their usefulness as terrorists is over. They are out of play, and as for encouraging les autres, forget it - you don't deter suicide bombers by custodial sentences (or even death sentences).

And the numbers probably will stay small; the more so, following these verdicts. The message is clear - the British courts are fair, or anyway their juries are. You will be given the benefit of the doubt in a jury trial, even if you are a dark-skinned bearded man with a scary name; even if you have made suicide videos and you admit up front that it was your plan to let off high explosives in a crowded public place. If the prosecutors can't prove beyond reasonable doubt that you were also going to blow up a plane, you still won't be convicted of trying to.

Frankly, if I was the Home Secretary I'd be making a massive propaganda coup out of this - not thinking about wasting a shipload of taxpayers' money on a retrial. (That *would* be expensive. Lawyers and judges are paid a lot more than either prison guards or surveillance teams, and you'd still need screws and spooks afterwards even if the retrial was "successful".)

It seems that the British security services are pointing the finger at America over the failure to make the airliner charges stick. It's being said that US-inspired haste at the Pakistani end of the operation meant the UK cops had to move too soon, before the bombers had even bought their airline tickets. Everyone's moaning about the pesky Americans going off half-cocked.

But what's the aim of the game here? Is it victory to get a longer jail sentence for a terrorist? One might argue that once you're talking about jail you're talking about damage limitation after a defeat, not victory of any kind.

Victory, you might say, is when a young man meets a Taliban or al-Q recruiter - travelling in Pakistan, at the mosque back home, at university, wherever - and finds himself unconvinced. That sort of genuine and elegant victory, you could argue, is more likely following this week's results - not less.

And it just could be that this time the hasty Americans in Pakistan, triggering an early end to the UK surveillance operation, have actually done us a favour. Possibly the accused men were planning mass murder, as the prosecution contends: but the cause of Western democracy gains a lot more by showing the world the manifold excellences of trial by jury than it could ever lose by failing to make that charge stick. ®

Lewis Page used to be a mine clearance diving officer in the Royal Navy. As such, he was trained in demolitions and bomb disposal. He was assigned as a bomb-squad operator in support of the mainland police from 2001-2004, holding a UK improvised-devices disposal licence for that period.

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