

A Matter of National Security

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— Some shit I never paid much mind

ONE

T5 was my first real checkpoint assignment after being hired on to TSA in 2007. Terminal 5 stands isolated from the rest of O'Hare: after stepping off the airport tram, fighting your way through a flood of passengers, and balancing your luggage on the escalator, you come to the main floor. Past the various international airline ticket counters you go—British Airways, Air India, Royal Jordanian, Aer Lingus—down a long hallway leading to the heart of the terminal. The flags of dozens of nations line both sides of the corridor, hung overhead. The hall could almost pass for a grand one, if the space weren't usually packed with a miserable mass of tired and confused international passengers, all hot and sweaty due to O'Hare's chronic climate control problems.

As the hellish wait-line crawls past the food court that sits off to the side, the first tangible TSA presence appears, the beginning of the security routine: anywhere from one to four agents seated at podiums, checking boarding passes.

That's where I was the day the Vietnam vet came through, the ticket checking position, matching up people's boarding passes with the information on their licenses and passports. I remember a guy from one of the disability service companies wheeled the vet up to me for the document check. When people in wheelchairs traveled alone, they usually arranged in advance for someone from one of the traveler assistance companies to help them pass through security. The Dis Ab employees were mostly kids, teenagers from Eastern Europe whose families had re-located to the North and Northwest sides of Chicago. They wore valet uniforms—green vests and black pants. The guy who wheeled the Vietnam vet up to me was a Polish kid named Konrad who liked to make fun of passengers behind their backs.

“Here is the gentlemen's ticket,” Konrad said, handing me the guy's boarding pass. “And passport.” Konrad winked as he handed the documents over, signaling me that this was going to be interesting.

“Just hurry the shit up,” the Vietnam vet said. “I've been waiting at this goddamned airport for 3 hours now.”

It was common knowledge at O'Hare that one of the few advantages International Terminal 5 had over all the terminals was that foreign travelers tended to be more docile than in domestic. No matter how many absurd security measures you laid on a group of travelers from Myanmar, for instance, they seemed to be happy enough that they were allowed to get on the plane at the end of the security procedures without being thrown in a little room. The fact that we didn't carry guns made us a relatively pleasant airport security force for a lot of foreign travelers, and many people from other countries were just so plain confused by U.S. airport security that they didn't know what to make of us. But maybe 10 percent of the passenger traffic you saw in Terminal 5 was made up of Americans, so you did get the occasional blast of outrage.

I passed my ultraviolet penlight over the vet's passport to make sure its watermarks fluoresced, and checked his name and information against the ticket. Born in the early 1950s. A tall guy, 6'3" or so. He was flying Malaysia Airways, Ho Chi Minh stamped as his final destination. Not at all unusual; you often saw Vietnam vets flying back to Nam for various reasons, often having to do with some manner of female friend they'd found over there at some point.

“You should just take me straight to the fucking plane, you know that?” the vet said.

He had stubbly cheeks and a pony tail flowing out the back of his baseball cap. He squeezed me with his eyes.

“Straight to the plane,” he said. “None of this bullshit ‘security.’ And you know why? Because I actually served my country. I did more than sign up to be a little airport cop with a cushy bureaucratic job, pretending to serve. You see what I sacrificed,” he said, nodding to his limp legs. “And after all of it, I still have to be hassled by you people, calling yourselves security officers. You don’t secure shit.” he said. “You’re just pains in the ass. You’re tearing down what I fought for.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said, handing the ticket and the passport back to Konrad, who in turn handed it to the vet. Konrad was smiling, trying not to laugh. He rolled his toxic charge up to the front of the security line.

I didn’t know how to deal with angry war vets at that early point in my TSA employment. Eventually I would come to realize that the best way to approach angry vets was to let them know I agreed with them: I was indeed holding down a poor excuse for a national security job, and I wasn’t doing shit next to what he or she had done for America.

“What was that all about?” asked Big Ted, my supervisor, who was standing behind me. How long he had been there I didn’t know. He always came up quietly like that, which could make one a little uneasy working on his watch. But besides the stealthiness, Big Ted was one of the few TSA supervisors I could tolerate. He was a middle-aged white dude who played in a band on weekends and was part of the unofficial faction of TSA employees who thought the security measures being sent down from D.C. were ridiculous and to be ignored as often as possible.

“He’s just pissed. He hates airport security,” I said.

“They all are. They all do,” Ted said.

“But he’s a vet,” I said.

“Shit.”

War vets were the angry passengers most feared by TSA agents. With the average furious American passenger, the argument came down to this, nine times out of ten:

Passenger: What sense do these rules make? Tell me right now. These rules are fucking stupid, and you know it.

TSA Agent: These security rules are in place for your protection, for the safety of America. If you don't like it, I'm not the one to argue with. Write your congressperson.

But most U.S. war vets had a killer rejoinder for what would usually be the TSA agent's last word: Don't You Tell Me About the Safety of America; I Almost Died Fighting for America in a War on Behalf of Your Little Snot-Nosed Ass, and I've Been Writing My Congressman About the Benefits I *Haven't* Been Receiving Since the End of that War for Years. Now Give Me Back My Fucking Bottled Water, Asshole.

"You've been out here for a while now. You can go back to the checkpoint now," Ted said, referring to the amount of time I'd spent out on the ticket checking position. We were only supposed to be on any given TSA position for 30 minutes, max, but agents often got stranded. I had been on ticket checking for nearly an hour, but I was happy there right at that moment: you at least got to sit down on the ticket checking position and rest your feet. I was hung-over that day and really didn't like the idea of standing guard at a walk-thru metal detector, or running from lane to lane, patting people down in a sunlight-flooded terminal with broken air conditioning.

"Been out here a while, but I'm fine."

"No, go ahead inside, I'll take over here."

"Shouldn't you be in there, in case the vet gets pissed during his pat-down?" I asked. "They're gonna have to give him a full-body pat-down. You know he won't be happy about it."

"That's exactly why I don't want to be in there," Ted said.

And so Supervisor Ted kicked me off the ticket checking podium, sending me back to the main checkpoint area, past a knot of passengers standing in line. I always felt a mixture of pride and pity, being able to walk past hundreds of passengers waiting in line to get to the secure side of an airport checkpoint— stroll right up to the swinging ADA (Americans with Disabilities) gate right next to whichever TSA agent was standing at the walk-thru metal detector post, show my federal badge, and get ushered right in without even a second look.

Although International Terminal 5 was the most reviled among TSA O'Hare agents, mostly due to the language barriers, I was happy with it for at least one reason: two of the people who had been in my training class were there with me, people who'd been hired at the same time as me—a teenage girl named Vivian and a young, friendly bright-eyed kid named Vasquez.

Vasquez was on the lane with me the day the vet came through, along with another TSA agent named Julie, who was seated in front of the Rapiscan control panel, running the carry-on luggage x-ray machine. Vasquez was a loyal TSA employee, a good-looking kid, half-Hispanic half-white with frost-tipped hair; he looked like a boy band member wrapped in a Transportation Security Administration uniform. Julie was about my age, mid-twenties, always chomping on gum. She had big blue eyes and a good sense of humor. But Julie was ferocious when angry. Everyone on the checkpoint was either scared of Julie or allied with her. When the agent standing at the walk-thru metal detector shouted "Male assist at the gate!" when confronted with the vet, it was Vasquez who answered the call to handle the situation.

"I got this," Vasquez said, heading toward the ADA gate. As Vasquez greeted the vet to give him the pat-down advisement, the vet cursed at Vasquez, loud enough for Julie and me to hear it, ten feet away.

"Sounds like *that's* gonna be fun," Julie said. "Well, at least the guy can't get up in Vasquez's face." She laughed a little as she ran the x-ray machine. (On-screen people's luggage looked, for the most part, like pixelated collages of green, orange and black blobs.) Another barrage of curses from the vet floated over to Julie and me as Vasquez guided him into the roped-off area where we gave people pat-downs.

"Actually, maybe that guy *is* going to manage to kill Vasquez. He probably has killer upper body strength," Julie said, turning toward me and away from the x-ray screen. Julie was wearing a pink bra that showed through her white federal-issue shirt, a violation of uniform policy that several managers had warned her about, mostly as an in to flirt with her.

Just as I was thinking about how lucky I was to have Vasquez on the lane with me, always willing, as he was, to deal with tough passengers such as the Vietnam vet, another male passenger showed up at the ADA gate.

"Male assist at the gate!" the agent manning the metal detector shouted again. I was the only male officer left on the lane; I had no choice but to do my duty as a TSA agent at that point, which never boded well.

"What's the deal with him?" I asked the agent standing guard at the metal detector, motioning to the forty-something white man in khaki shorts and Polo shirt standing at the gate.

"Pacemaker," the agent said.

Passengers with pacemakers couldn't walk through the metal detector, since the magnetic field could interfere with the device and cause them to drop dead of cardiac arrest on the spot. So pacemaker passengers almost always stopped short of the metal detector, showed a med card to the agent standing there, and asked to be patted down.

"I'm gonna be giving you a pat-down," I said to Pacemaker, launching into the standard spiel. "Did you send all your luggage through the x-ray machine? Is everything out of your pockets?"

"Yeah yeah yeah. But my son's over there, on the other side, so let's just hurry this up."

At that point there were two pat-downs going simultaneously on our lane, which meant that Vasquez and I were right next to each other in the roped-off area, both dealing with our respective passengers. Vasquez had his furious Vietnam vet in the wheelchair, and I had my unhappy dad with a heart condition. Vasquez and I both struggled to give our required speeches.

"Okay, sir," I said to my passenger, "I'm going to be touching you all over, from your head to the bottom of your feet. When I get to your chest area I'll be sure to be careful with your pacemaker—"

"I know, I know. I fly all the time. Just hurry this up."

"...Are you able to stand at all sir, or at least lift yourself up from the wheelchair so I can pat down your buttocks?" Vasquez asked the vet.

"Of course I *can't* fucking stand," the vet cut him off, "Do you see this fucking wheelchair? If I could stand, don't you think I'd do away with the goddamned wheelchair?"

"Sir, there's no need for that kind of language," Vasquez said.

"Why don't you try actually *doing* something for your country instead of hassling people, and then tell me there's no reason for my goddamned language," the vet said.

"He has a point," my passenger said as I patted the collar of his Polo. "All you guys do is hassle people."

It was a duet of discontent.

"Do I look like a goddamned terrorist threat to you?" the vet asked, both arms raised and spread like a chair-bound Christ, holding his wallet in one hand, as Vasquez started in on his pat-down. "It looks to me like there are a lot of other people coming through

this checkpoint— people who aren't even U.S. citizens—who you should be more interested in," the vet said.

"You're picking on a war hero? Am I actually witnessing this?" my passenger asked, looking over to Vasquez and the vet. He then squinted toward the end of the conveyor belt, where the passengers picked up their luggage. "Jimmy, come over here," he said.

The guy's kid—10 or 11-years-old in sweatpants, sweatshirt and socks— came padding over to the pat-down area, ducked beneath the rope to get to his dad.

"Whoa whoa whoa," Vasquez and I shouted at almost the same time. I took a step toward the man's son, my palm held out like a stop sign. "You can't come in here, sir," I said. Then, remembering he was just a kid, I turned back to Dad. "He can't come in here, sir. You can't have contact with him or anyone until after your pat-down is complete"

"Dad?" the boy said, unsure of how to deal with the conflicting orders—his father beckoning him, and me repelling him.

"Listen to the man, Jimmy. Back off. We can't be together right now, because I might be a terrorist. This is what's called a *burgeoning police state*, Jimmy. And it wasn't always like this. You just got lucky: you were born right into it."

"Oh for *fuck's sake*," the vet said. "Let the man be with his goddamned son."

"Sir, I have to pat-down your buttocks," Vasquez told the vet. "I'm going to have to get another officer to lift you off the chair so I can get to that area."

"You're not having anyone lift me up off this goddamned chair," the vet said. "And you're not touching my ass."

"Are you watching what's happening in here, Jimmy?" my passenger shouted to his son, "This is a man who fought for our country being molested by the government."

"I don't think my PlayStation came out of the x-ray machine, Dad," the boy responded.

"There are bigger things to worry about than the goddamned PlayStation, Jimmy."

Now Julie, watching from the x-ray machine, started laughing.

"What the hell are you guys doing to those poor passengers?" she shouted.

"You're free to go, sir," I said to my passenger after sliding my hands along the bottom of his feet, the final touch of the pat-down procedure back in those days.

“Jason! You patted his feet down wrong!” Julie shouted. “You used a sliding motion! It’s supposed to be a patting motion!”

God I hated Julie sometimes.

“I’m not going anywhere until this guy’s free to go, too,” my passenger said, pointing to the vet.

Vasquez pulled me off to the side for TSA talk.

“Hey, whaddya think? Will you help me lift him off the chair so I can pat down his ass?”

“I don’t think he’s going to permit himself to be lifted,” I whispered.

“But I have to pat down the buttocks,” Vasquez said.

“Just pat the bottom of the wheelchair, feel the buttocks through the seat. Good enough. Let’s just get these two the fuck outta here,” I said.

“That’s an SOP violation,” Vasquez said. “We have to properly clear the buttocks.”

A boarding call crackled over the airport PA system.

“I’m gonna miss my goddamned plane,” the vet said.

“Fuck the SOP,” I said. “Just pat down the bottom of his seat and call it a day.”

“If he misses his plane, I miss my plane, too. I’m not leaving this man behind,” my passenger said.

“Finally, a real patriot,” the vet said.

“Maybe I should call for the supervisor,” Vasquez said. “It’s a security breach if I let him go without the ass-pat.”

“Just pat under the chair,” I said. “For Christ’s sake.”

Vasquez was always so goddamned by the book. It annoyed the hell out of me. Big Ted would probably say the same thing anyway, even if Vasquez did call him over to confer. When dealing with a paralyzed war hero in full public view, it was probably best to avoid lifting him up and groping his ass as he loudly protested. Vasquez lingered in front of the vet for a few moments, considering what to do, before finally bending down, patting the underside of the chair’s seat, and straightening back up.

“OK. You can go, sir,” Vasquez said.

“God bless America,” my passenger said.

But the vet didn't move to roll himself out of the corral.

“You're sure I can go now, *officer?*” the vet asked.

“You're good to go,” I put in for Vasquez. “*Everyone is free to go,*” I announced to the checkpoint in general.

“That's great.” my passenger said. “But you know you both just missed a test, right?”

I turned around, thinking it was some sort of joke. The federal badge was already out of my passenger's wallet. A DHS badge, just like mine. The little boy was smiling big, just on the other side of the ropes. The kid was in on it.

When I turned back to the vet, he was already standing to his full height of 6'3, his rear turned to Vasquez for inspection. A thin layer of orange plastic was taped to his ass. Sealed inside the plastic was a gelatinous substance.

“14 grams of simulation Semtex,” the vet said, in a completely new voice. The vet's voice had been ragged throughout the whole ordeal. Now it was somehow clean-cut. “Enough to bring down that plane.” Now he was pulling his federal badge out of his wallet, too. “Call your supervisor. We have to have a little talk.”

30 minutes later, Vasquez, Julie and I all sat in the TSA managers' office. The managers' office in Terminal 5 was up in the mezzanine, on the second floor, which allowed the managers to walk out of the office, stroll along the mezzanine and look down upon the operations with a guard tower view. This unique positioning sometimes made working Terminal 5 a real nightmare, especially when you had an evil manger working up there. Luckily, the manager that day was Rolanda, a Puerto Rican woman in her early 40s. Relatively reasonable, as far as TSA management went.

“I watched that whole thing on video,” Rolanda said after making us sweat for a couple minutes while she shuffled some papers around in a manila folder. She then spent nearly half-a-minute straightening her tie, for good measure. Managers didn't have to wear any sort of TSA uniform. In fact, business attire was encouraged for managers, and so some of the TSA managers tried to out-do each other in a sort of federal fashion war. Rolanda was wearing a checkered silk shirt along with the tie. Probably designer. She wore her hair short, and rocked a suit better than all the male managers. She'd taken off her blazer at that point; our test failure had probably made her too heated for

the blazer. “I don’t think I have to tell you that you guys fucked everything up down there,” she said, finally looking up.

“/ fucked something up?” Julie said.

“Watch the language,” Rolanda said.

“Well, don’t tell me / messed something up when it was these two *idiots* who failed the test,” Julie said, waving toward Vasquez and me.

“Julie,” Rolanda said. “Stop. You were talking on the x-ray just before the second guy came through. Talking to Harrington. You know I can write you up for that. In fact, I have to.”

At this, Julie leaned back in her chair and shot me a look that said she’d never talk to me again. She couldn’t argue with Rolanda’s talk of the video. Everything on the checkpoint was recorded by dozens of closed circuit cameras covering nearly every inch of every airport checkpoint. The nerve center of any given airport was TSOC, the Transportation Security Operations Center, the room where all the most sensitive checkpoint security business was handled. TSOC was the room where the valuables that passengers left behind were brought, the room that received first reports of any weapons discovered on the checkpoint, the room where a big-screen monitor was divided into 32 tiny pictures of constantly changing video feeds—the people up in TSOC could zoom in on any area of any checkpoint in the airport and roll the footage back to any moment requested by a supervisor or manager.

“Well *I’m* not the one who let explosives slip past me, like Vasquez.”

“I knew something was wrong with that guy,” Vasquez said, slouched in his seat, arms crossed. He hadn’t even looked any of us in the eye since we’d gotten in the room; he was thousand-yard-stare angry. “I knew it.”

Of course, what Vasquez was leaving out here was, “*But Harrington made me hurry up and let the Vietnam vet go,*” as in “I knew something was wrong but *Harrington* told me it was fine.” It was all silly, as far as I was concerned, because the test wasn’t at all realistic, as usual: what terrorist would bother risking such a small amount of explosives taped to the ass? If someone were really determined to go for it, he or she would go one little step further and slip the explosives up inside a body cavity, where none of our security measures could yet reach. The real problem was that I, along with Vasquez, had only been with the TSA for a little over a year at that point. The probationary period lasted 2 years at the TSA. Until an employee reached the 2-year mark, he or she could be let go for virtually any infraction.

“Harrington? What do you have to say about all this?” Rolanda said.

“What? I didn’t miss anything, did I? The guy I patted down didn’t have anything on him, right?” I’d been waiting to ask that question for over 30 minutes. After we were informed we’d missed the test we weren’t told anything else.

“No. But the testers told me what went on down there. They told me you pressured Vasquez into loosening the security measures.”

“So the kid was in on it too, right?” I said. I had been sure the guy I was patting down couldn’t be a tester, since he had what was supposedly his kid with him. My reasoning had always been, up to that point, that testers couldn’t possibly use young children in their act, since the kids would technically have to be on the payroll in order to take part in federal security operations, which would probably present some legal issues by way of federal regulations on public servants.

“Don’t worry about who or what the kid was. Fact is, they got you. You can’t let passengers pressure you into cutting corners on the SOP, no matter what,” Rolanda said.

“Harrington and Vasquez are always doing things wrong,” Julie chimed in.

“Julie, *please*. But yes, it does appear that way. What was that with the guy’s foot, Harrington?”

“*Told you*,” Julie said. “You *pat* the bottom of the foot with your hand. You don’t *slide*.”

“It’s not the sliding I care about. Pat, slide: whether you pat or slide, as long as you clear the bottom of the foot, that’s all I care about. The problem was that you slid your hand along the bottom of his foot *horizontally*, Harrington.”

“Yeah, Harrington, *that* too,” Julie said. “You do the bottom of the feet wrong in every way. How many times have you heard in training that it’s a damn hotdog-wise patting motion not a hamburger-wise patting motion on the bottom of the foot?”

“Julie, *shut up*,” Rolanda said, smiling despite herself. Somehow, Julie managed to enter into a mischievous-but-lovable-daughter relationship with all TSA authority figures, so that no matter what she did or said, it was always *Aw, Julie. You crazy kid*. It didn’t seem as though Julie would ever be in any real trouble with TSA management.

“Look. I’m writing you all up, and you guys are de-certified.”

“Oh, *hell* no, you’re not writing me up because of these morons—”

"I'm not de-certifying you, Julie. I'm just giving you a warning write-up. The guys are getting letters of reprimands and losing certification for the rest of the day. That was a federal test," she said, looking from me to Vasquez. *"Do you realize how serious it is when you miss a Red Team test like that? It doesn't just mean you're compromising national security. It means the Federal Security Director of this airport looks bad. And when that happens, people get fired. You guys are lucky: this is the first federal test we've missed in a while, so you're not gonna lose your jobs this time. But this is on your records. And if either of you ever misses a Red Team test again...."*

She didn't even finish the sentence. Vasquez finished it for her, finally looking Rolanda in the eye.

"We're fired," Vasquez said. *"Well, I'll tell you what I've learned from all this: I'm making every passenger in a wheelchair stand up from now on. "*

Back on the checkpoint, Vasquez and I carried Letters of Reprimand in our pockets for the rest of the day, Vasquez's LOR folded at least four times and tucked inside his wallet and mine folded however many times was necessary to get it to approximately the same size as my pack of cigarettes. Throughout my federal career I generally lost disciplinary documents within a week or so of receiving them. Sometimes I threw them away as soon as I got home, not wanting to think about the crush of my government job. Sometimes I laughed about them over beers with my middle-aged roommates, relaying the bureaucratese with slurry dramatic deliveries. The Letter of Reprimand was the most feared piece of regularly issued TSA paperwork. Only the rarely seen Notice of Suspension write-up was more reviled, along with, of course, the Employment Separation Proposal (although the ESP was like the White Light at the End of a Tunnel Accompanied by a Soothing Voice in that few people ever returned to the checkpoint to relay the specifics of dealing with an ESP). The Letter of Reprimand basically made clear to the TSA employee that he or she was in some serious shit. The official D.C. Red Team test we missed was the kind the media sometimes got word of, resulting in headlines such as "Studies Show TSA Agents Miss 95% of Security Tests: Is the Airport Any Safer After 9/11?" Missing one of those meant you were definitely on management's radar. If Vasquez or I got another LOR within the next several months or so, it could lead to an ESP. Vasquez and I were basically one wrong move away from being ex-federal employees.

"I'm lifting the bastards out of their wheelchairs and patting their asses down, even if I have to do it my goddamned self," Vasquez said toward the end of our shift. He was eating a Happy Meal, in keeping with his oddly childish eating habits. Vasquez took

special pride in a portable candy collection he carried around in his Nike backpack. The candy backpack was perhaps the most disconcerting feature in the assemblage of strange personal facts and characteristics that made Vasquez a surreal picture of a TSA officer: a Justin Bieber lookalike with a backpack full of jelly beans and lemon drops, running around O'Hare airport in a federal uniform barking SOP-related commands over a walkie-talkie.

"I'm done messing around. Fuck these testers," Vasquez continued, nibbling on a fry. The break room was just a couple tables, a computer in the corner for online learning purposes, and some government-issue posters on the wall, including the obligatory printed reminder that if One Sees Something, One Should Say Something, the poster's letters floating above a pair of blue eyes focused on a black silhouette with a backpack.

"I'm patting down feet with a vertical motion from now on," I said, trying to cheer the kid up. That's what I did wrong. My LOR is about the feet."

"I can't believe you messed that up," Vasquez said, straining his frost-tipped hair through his hands, as though my foot-patting technique was going to make him lose it prematurely. "You've got to get it together. We've all got to get our shit together from now on."

Vasquez and I had both been hired at the same, and here he was giving me a Let Down Dad look. That was the first time I felt like I was talking to a supervisor instead of a coeval with Vasquez, the moment I knew Vasquez had a special kind of TSA ambition. But I didn't realize then just how high Vasquez would climb up the chain of command—a dizzying ascent that would culminate in Vasquez's terrifying reign as the Little SOP King of O'Hare.

A few days after the vet came through Vasquez forced an 80-year-old man out of his wheelchair so as to pat down the guy's buttocks. The man was en route to chemo treatment. Vasquez was gentle when he swabbed the guy's oxygen tank for traces of explosives; less so when he hoisted him out of his chair and ran his hands up and down the man's bony backside. He even called Rolanda to the checkpoint to watch as he patted down the sick man, just to make sure she was now pleased with his wheelchair screening

Of all the things I hated about working TSA, that was the worst: stretching sick passengers over the security rack. My mother had just been diagnosed with breast cancer a couple months earlier, so screening ill passengers made the days especially hard. I was taking a drawing class as an elective at the time, so I used to sit down with pencil and pad at gate M7 during break, incognito in my reversible coat, Sox hat pulled

low, trying to refashion the checkpoint scene by sketching passengers coming through 10.

Watch long enough and you'll see people on their death chairs being processed through a checkpoint. The SOP required all headwear to be patted down, and so that's what I sketched: blue-gloved hands kneading tie-dyed bandanas and silk head scarves with paisley appliques. Eyebrows and eyelashes left un-penciled. That was what surprised me with my mother; somehow I didn't think the eyelashes went too. You felt like you were wasting a different kind of time with those pat-downs.

Chiaroscuro with Middle Eastern families in the foreground. I spent days trying to nail the shading on the robes. We put them in what we called the corral, a Plexiglas enclosure for passengers who automatically got our enhanced screening based on Middle Eastern points of origin. In one, I had the flow of a burqa intertwined with her husband's thobe. In another, I focused on the negative space between a Muslim family and the others in the queue.

Marines flying out on deployment orders: SOP strictly prohibited touching their deployment papers—thick brown envelopes with red wax seals. A Marine was not to allow deployment orders to be separated from his or her person under any circumstances. Most were making their way to the Persian Gulf then. They all called me sir, the soldiers. Where most of the civilian passengers hated us, the military people called you sir and ma'am without exception, no matter what absurd TSA rule you threw in their face.

I'm sorry, Sergeant, but you can't bring those nail clippers on the plane, in the name of national security.

Understood, sir.

I hated when they called me sir. I would have rather they spat on me. The worst part about it was we made them remove their boots. Everyone had to remove their footwear, military was no exception. And so that's what I drew: lines of young Marines in olive drab socks clutching deployment orders, waiting to be waved through metal detectors by federal officers.

Jason Harrington is a writer from Chicago. He is working on a memoir based on his time at the TSA, from which his piece, "A Matter of National Security," is excerpted. He is an MFA candidate at the University of Mississippi in Oxford.