

Defending Our Skies Against the Elderly

As I watched the airport screener search my father, I had to wonder: have we lost our common sense?

BY DIANE DIMOND

BEFORE HE PASSED AWAY IN March, Allen O. Hughes took his final trip East. He came with Ruby, his wife of 56 years. They came not because they liked to travel—they came because Allen had lymphoma and he wanted to visit his only daughter and his granddaughter and his two great-grandchildren one last time.

The last I saw of him, a burly airport screener was forcing my frail and faltering 78-year-old father to stand at attention—arms spread—for a wand search. As I watched from the other side of the security gate I saw the man in the uniform point to my father to sit down and take off his shoes. These were the very shoes I'd just seen him wrestle on at home. He hadn't noticed me in the guest room doorway in the predawn light, but I had nearly cried as I watched him groaning his way into those shoes. Old-man shoes, I thought—you know, the ones with the Velcro straps—but they were about all he could manage.

Even hoisting himself up into my Jeep seemed a chore. As we headed for the airport I heard my husband, Michael, say, "Nice to have you here, Allen. Keep up the battle." Dad just dipped his chin and said softly, "I will."

My father was a man of few words: a proud man who had served his country during World War II, who had left the Navy and taken Uncle Sam up on the offer of the GI Bill to start his own business in Albuquerque, N.M. So he never said a word as he was plucked out of the line of travelers at the Westchester airport in New York. He'd already taken off his jacket. He'd untangled himself from the oxygen finger-cuff he wore on a string around his neck and put it in the little basket gliding down the conveyor belt. I held my breath as Dad shuffled through the electronic archway. Something

made it squeal, and that's when the burly man motioned my father to the side.

You have to understand: my dad grew up dirt-poor in the northern reaches of North Dakota. He endured a terrible childhood and somewhere early on he taught



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himself pride and the importance of struggling through. So as sick as he was, as exhausted as the weeklong trip to New York had to have been, he did as he was told.

The man who never broke a law in his life stretched out his arms, stared straight ahead and waited as the wand passed over him. I heard the beep as the wand passed his left wrist. Without asking permission, the screener pulled back my father's sleeve to reveal the \$20 watch he had bought because it had big enough numbers to read without his glasses. That damn wand kept going. Down to my father's belt buckle where I heard another beep. Again, with-

out a word, the screener yanked up my father's flannel shirt, slipped his hand down around the buckle and tugged on it. I watched helplessly, knowing that if I shouted out my increasing rage I'd humiliate my father even more. I could see Dad clench his jaw as the last tug on his belt nearly made him lose his balance. Did the screener really think my father might wreak havoc on a planeload of people?

I'm not blaming the airport screener. He was just doing as he's trained to do. And I haven't forgotten what a handful of maniacs did on American soil nearly three years ago—but come on! Is *this* our best answer?

I waited on the visitors' side of the metal-detector station until my father struggled back into his shoes. My mother was standing at the end of the conveyor belt where she'd gathered up his coat, oxygen meter and wallet. As he shuffled over they spoke a few quiet words and my mother pointed to their gate. I don't know if it was embarrassment or fatigue, but Dad forgot to turn around for a final wave.

I have seen elderly people put through similar indignities at airports in Dallas, Cincinnati and Los Angeles. I remember the Dallas incident with clarity because the subject of the search reminded me of my father, except that the man was traveling alone and carrying a cane. The screener took away his cane, made him remove his belt and shoes and then left him to sit there while the screener consulted with his supervisor about how best to scan the cane.

Even as Dad battled his illness my parents still performed great acts of charity in their community. They read the newspaper so they could cast informed votes on Election Day. They went to the Albuquerque Fleet Reserve Club once a week to stay

in touch with friends, where I'm sure my father never mentioned the scene at the airport. Instead, he would have told his Navy buddies stories about watching the Yankees on his son-in-law's big-screen television. But I remain indignant.

Of course we need to screen airplane passengers, but I think there is a better way. My first suggestion is to include in the security training this mantra: "You must look into the passenger's eyes. People should be treated with respect." Isn't that the way of life we're all fighting to keep?

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