

TRAVELING ON AIRLINES TO CFDA EVENTS

By: Cal Eilrich a.k.a. Quick Cal, Executive Director of CFDA
(Revised: November 27, 2016)

After years of traveling by air since 1970 to many shooting tournaments, I've had to learn to cope with the airline industry and their ever changing policies. When considering traveling to a shoot, but you hesitate flying due to concerns of regulatory hassles of transporting your six-guns, this article was written for you.

ATTITUDE

Traveling with firearms is completely legal and proper, but there are rules that must be followed. The best attitude I've found to deal with the challenge of following those rules is to approach it as a game you have decided to play in order to win. It may seem strange to think of airline safety as a "game", especially during the times in which we live. So, if you adopt a positive mindset of compliance you will find moving through the system is relatively easy.

The key is to understand that the TSA & FAA makes the rules and policies, and just like any other bureaucracy their rules don't always seem to make sense in every case. It is only important to understand the rules and be prepared to play the "game". Please go there with a positive attitude and be ready to assist the TSA and Ticket Agents to do their important jobs. Whatever you do, don't allow yourself to start arguing with anyone in a heated manner and always stay calm. **If you start any kind of a heated exchange, you will not get your way and you will probably miss your flight.**

BEFORE YOU GO

Check your pockets, purses, and carry-on baggage for anything that is not allowed by TSA. This includes ammunition, knives, fluids, cigarette lighters and especially your trusty pocket pistol.

LUGGAGE

You cannot transport a firearm in carry-on baggage, it must only be transported in checked baggage. According to FAA regulations the gun(s) must be transported in a hard-locked case separate from any ammunition. I would suggest getting a Samsonite or similar hard suitcase, they have them now with "TSA Approved Locks", which means they have a pass key for it. They seem rather impressed to actually see one and they know you're not trying to hide anything. Stay away from anything that looks expensive like aluminum cases, camera bags, gun cases, etc. They can become attractive targets for some crooked baggage handlers and are more likely to get ripped off and never use Sky Cap Services when checking firearms. I've never lost a bag on an airline, although I know folks who have. I've had them misplaced temporarily, but always have gotten them back. Probably because with packing tape I permanently tape a card with my name, address, and cell-phone number on the outside and inside of the bag.

I used to run into Ticket Agents who insisted that the red firearm tag be attached to the outside of the bag, which is not a TSA or FAA regulation anymore, but it used to be, and there still may be some airlines with that policy. So, I go a step further, I place my pistol in a small hard gun case, lock it, and place it inside my larger hard suitcase. I've never found anyone who wasn't willing to tag the smaller one that's inside and out of sight.

I also like to take the cylinders out of my single action pistols. They will always ask, "Is the firearm unloaded?" Therefore, I like to say, "Yes, it is unloaded and it is also disassembled?" There are some airlines that will inspect it, but most will not. It is their option and if you make them feel comfortable, they'll usually go along with you and you'll be on your way at smaller airports.

EXPLOSIVE SCREENING

At larger airports they now have an extra bag screening area manned by the TSA. Sometimes you take your bags there yourself from the ticket counter and one of the agents places it on their conveyor to be screened for explosives. Stay in that area until it clears the screening machine and is loaded on the conveyor to be loaded on the plane. If your bag sets off the alarm, present yourself as the owner of the bag and stand there while they hand inspect it. Stay calm and be ready to answer any questions, stay an arm's length away and don't put your hands anywhere near the bag. It is probably little things like residue on your holster if you had a boot shot or residue on your pistol if you didn't clean it enough or whatever. They'll just look everything over and that'll be it, it's probably a good idea to pack clean underwear. After that, you'll be on your way.

AMMUNITION

I would suggest that you make arrangements for ammunition to be provided at the contest you're attending, most of the larger ones do anyway. However, it is within regulations to transport loaded ammunition. So if you feel compelled to bring some shotgun primer ammo load it all up in the hard cases that CFDA supplies with its brass, complete with wax and primers installed. The regulations do say "factory containers only", but since

you load the ammo yourself, the commercial hard plastic containers do qualify. **Do not attempt to transport primers, unless they are preloaded in brass, and packed in a hard plastic container.** Wax bullets and empty casings shouldn't be a problem.

PLAN EXTRA TIME

Make sure that you don't cut yourself short on arriving early at airports, especially when you are transporting firearms. All airports are different in regards to how early you should arrive for a flight. Most say 1-1/2 hours, some say 2 hours, some even longer. Whatever time your airport says, add an extra 1/2 hour to that stated time. It can vary greatly during peak and lull hours. If you are rushed, you are more likely to show pressure and impatience to the TSA agents, and as I already have stated that is not wise.

If for unforeseen reason you are delayed by things such as traffic, accidents, or other issues. Be aware that you are just going to have to stay efficient and calm as you can, and you just might make your flight. Just accept the consequences and catch the next flight, if you get angry, they may make sure that you miss that one too.

IMPORTANT

If you have a holster with cartridges in the belt, take them out for this trip. I would advise you to put your holster in your checked baggage and do not attempt to pack it in carry-on baggage. Never try to get away with not declaring your firearms in your luggage, it's just super stupid and certainly not worth the fines, the inconvenience of missing your flight, ruining your trip, or even possibly going to jail.

THE PAY-OFF

If you follow the rules and play the game there is no reason not to fly to CFDA matches that are a long distance. It's really the most economical way for one or two people to travel more than a day's drive. Flying is fun and you can go places that you would not be able to otherwise.