By Barrett Tillman

According to “experts,” a .50 caliber sniper rifle can destroy an airliner. Therefore, civilian ownership of .50 caliber rifles should be banned.

In 2005 CBS News aired a program addressing the “threat” that privately owned .50s pose to air travel. The onscreen critic was Tom Diaz of the Violence Policy Center. He told CBS, “I just think that there are certain occasions when we say in our society, this product is such a threat to our health and safety, and in this case, our national security, we will not allow it.”

The gun-rights side of the subject was provided by Ronnie Barrett, who needs no introduction to Blue Press readers. Asked about his highly successful M82, he stated, “It’s a target rifle…a high-end adult recreational toy. Any rifle in the hands of a terrorist is a deadly weapon.”

That includes airliners hijacked because passengers are prevented from defending themselves.

Apparently the worst-case realistic scenario floated by .50 banners is aircraft on the ramp or taxiing. In fact, military snipers can use .50s on hard targets such as parked aircraft, radar dishes, or vehicles. Put a couple of 700-grainers through a jet engine, and that airplane is grounded pending repairs. But that’s an inconvenience, not a disaster.

Incidentally, rifle shooters (and some gun banners) know that any hunting-caliber round will easily penetrate the aluminum skin of any commercial and most military aircraft – from way out there. The difference is that gun banners are selective in what they tell you.

So, how about hitting an airliner in flight?

The only way to do so would be a plane taking off or landing. Assuming the .50-caliber terrorist got within range (perhaps between a quarter and half a mile) he would need a no-deflection shot for much chance of a hit. But that means positioning oneself directly ahead of or behind the flight path at a metropolitan airport – and shooting in a matter of seconds.

A side view probably offers better chances for a shooting position. But from 400 to 500 yards, a full-deflection shot on a jetliner landing or climbing at 130 to 150 knots would require a lead of perhaps 100 to 150 feet or more to hit a desired spot – assuming the shooter was fast and accurate with a 30-pound piece of metal.

If anyone has a way to practice that shot, it would be fascinating to observe. First you’d have to rent a 737 or better – starting at about $120 a minute, never mind the return deposit on the airplane. Then you would need a Haji/Hajj/Hadj (however it’s spelled) jet pilot to fly it around the pattern until your shooter dials in his lead for a given speed and distance.

And incidentally, bargain-basement discount .50 ammo goes for about $3.50 a pop. Are you starting to see a pattern?

Assuming a hit, what would be the likely result?

We can tell you with some precision: It would be a half-inch diameter hole in an airplane weighing around 35 tons, not counting fuel, which would depend upon takeoff or landing configuration.

Could that hit kill somebody?

Yes, it could. But why bother to shoot one or two airline travelers when you can blow up dozens of people with one bomb? Or thousands if you hijack an airliner full of defenseless passengers.

But could a .50-caliber hit destroy the airplane?

No. And here’s why.

During World War II and into the jet age, the standard U.S. fighter aircraft armament was six Browning M2 .50 calibers. They cycled at 800 rpm or more – at least 13 rounds per second. Times six equals 78 for a one-second trigger squeeze. That’s a lot of 700-grain projectiles starting at 2,800 foot-seconds.

How effective was that armament? Across the board it typically resulted in 60 percent of enemy aircraft hit in air combat assessed as destroyed, though that figure is optimistic. We won’t address those credited as “probables” because their fate is unknowable, but the large majority certainly survived.

In the Pacific Theater, the combined efforts of Army, Navy, and Marine fliers resulted in nearly 1,000 Japanese aircraft credited as damaged in aerial...continued on Page 51