These are my opinions as a CFI (hopefully future airline pilot) and firearms enthusiast with about 100 hours of firearms training and a concealed handgun permit.

Flight crews need to be permitted to arm themselves after appropriate training. Airline pilots have already proven themselves responsible and capable enough to handle a very complex aircraft that could become a “weapon of mass destruction” if they make an error in the wrong situation. We trust the flight crew with our lives every time we get on an airplane. Pilots need to have a firearm available for the worst-case situation where all other security measures have failed. The popularity of the sky marshal idea proves that almost everyone is comfortable with properly screened and trained people carrying firearms onboard aircraft.

Sky marshals on every airliner are a good idea but would be very expensive. They would be able to take care of the vast majority of cabin disturbances without the flight crew getting involved and will make air travel safer. Sky marshals enable the flight crew to fly the airplane knowing that most cabin disturbance would be dealt with by a highly trained and armed professional. A disadvantage sky marshals face is that they stay in the cabin and could easily be incapacitated and disarmed if taken by surprise by an attacker with a weapon such as a composite knife. It would not be trivial to figure out who the sky marshal(s) is on any particular flight, but it probably wouldn’t be all that hard. Unfortunately sky marshals are expensive and will probably not be on every flight.

Sky marshals also face a very complex decision-making and shooting situation. The cabin of an airliner during a hijacking must be a very chaotic place with an unknown number of unknown and possibly camouflaged threats coming from 360 degrees at the same time. In contrast, an armed flight crew could simply wait for the sky marshal (if onboard) to take care of any problems in the cabin. If the sky marshal is incapacitated and the hijackers were still a threat or the cockpit door was in danger of being breached, aggressive maneuvering may incapacitate the hijackers. If ALL other measures proved unproductive and the cockpit door was about to be breached, an armed flight crewmember could simply point his firearm at the door and shoot anything that came through it. A fairly simple shooting situation. A Kevlar seat back would shift the odds even more in favor of the pilots. Because of the simpler shooting situation, I believe that pilots wouldn’t need as much training as sky marshals.

Stronger cockpit doors are also a good idea but there is the issue of rescuing the crew in the event of a mishap. Cockpit doors can delay an attacker, but nothing is impenetrable to an attacker who has studied the problem. Even bank vaults that weight more then most airplanes can be defeated.

Stun guns border on useless when being attacked with a deadly weapon. They produce a shock and momentary pain similar to a bee sting, but little or no incapacitation. It probably isn’t a good idea to carry pepper spray or mace on an airplane because they could incapacitate the user and everyone around (including the flight crew) indiscriminately and probably wouldn’t stop a serious attacker anyway. A good folding knife or a cane would be superior to most non-lethal weapons available today.

I believe there is no substitute for a full size handgun in 9mm or greater. The exact caliber isn’t that important, but it would need to be something with appropriate penetration characteristics. Many of today’s hollow point and frangible loadings would work. Normally high price, complex/fragile design and low reliability make today’s “smart gun” ideas undesirable, but they might have a place aboard an aircraft. They would significantly reduce the threat of a sky marshal’s or pilot’s firearm being used by a hijacker. There are bullet designs currently available with appropriate penetration characteristics. You could use whatever firearms you are using for the Sky Marshals program, as the requirements are very similar.

Storing firearms should be the responsibility of the individual pilots. I don’t believe this would be a big problem since law enforcement officers, security professionals, and responsible citizens carry firearms as part of their daily lives. Most states don’t have a problem with private citizens who have clean records and

“carry permits” carrying firearms every day throughout daily life. Gun safes and lockboxes would be needed at home, but most pilots wanting to arm themselves would probably already be gun owners have safes at home. Again, there seems to be a program in place for sky marshal’s and other federal law enforcement professionals to carry firearms just about anywhere and qualified pilots could simply be added to that program.

Small lockboxes would probably have a place in the cockpit, even if just a place to put a firearm while going to the bathroom because armed pilots walking to restrooms in the back would be a likely target for hijackers. Of course “smart guns” would help in that case.

A 3-5 day handgun course would be more then adequate to teach any willing pilot how to safely and effectively carry and use a firearm. A well run 3-5 day course would probably have most pilots shooting significantly better then the average law enforcement officer in my opinion. Recurrent training is necessary to keep any skill but many pilots are already gun owners and shooting enthusiasts and train on their own. I believe there should be requalification at least every 4 month’s with training as necessary to keep qualified.

In my opinion, the decision to get certified to carry a firearm should be left to the individual. A crewmember forced to carry a firearm would probably not devote the energy to learn to use it properly and might not posses the mindset necessary to use it if the situation ever arose. The captain, being responsible for everything on board, would probably also need to be able to prohibit his crew from carrying firearms if he felt (as some do) that it is unethical to use deadly force to save innocent lives.

The credentials could be handled several ways. A “firearm” rating could available to add to commercial and ATP (or even private) pilot certificates after required training, testing, and background checks. Another option is to make whatever “sky marshal” (or “deputy sky marshal”) credentials are being used now available to trained and qualified pilots.

Some of the best reason’s to allow pilots to carry firearms is because it would be cheap and has little or no downside. Many pilots who we already trust our lives to are willing to carry firearms to protect us aboard airliners and do the job for free. Armed and trained pilots could provide a very formidable layer of protection for all of us. Anyone entrusted with a 600,000lb airliner can be trusted with a handgun.