

THE PRANK

THAT'S STILL RUFFLING FEATHERS

One man's prank at Sydney airport has had far bigger consequences than he imagined. Story: CHRIS UHLMANN



They call it the streaker's defence: "It seemed like a good idea at the time". Perhaps that's why a Sydney airport baggage handler removed a camel's suit from some checked baggage and wore the head as he drove about the tarmac, to the amusement of his colleagues, the bemusement of passengers and the astonishment of the owner of said suit.

But the incident proved to be one of the straws that broke the camel's back for federal parliament's Public Accounts and Audit Committee, which has reopened its inquiry into aviation security.

It did not help that a month before the incident lawyers for Australian Schapelle Corby claimed their client, languishing in a Bali jail cell on drug charges, had been the victim of a drug smuggling operation involving baggage handlers.

The final straw fell in early May when federal agents began rounding up some Sydney airport baggage handlers they allege were involved in a syndicate attempting to smuggle up to \$15 million of cocaine in suitcases from South America.

The inquiry reopened on May 26 with Committee Chairman Bob Baldwin (Member for Paterson, NSW) saying the committee was "greatly concerned by recent reports of security breaches at Australian airports".

"The committee will review incidents since our last report in June 2004 to ensure that the Australian public is not being placed in harm's way," he said.

As if to underline that concern, five days later the *Australian* newspaper revealed details of a classified Customs report which said Sydney Airport staff, including baggage handlers with high-level security clearances, had been involved in drug smuggling and stealing from passengers.

Public concern about what was going on at the nation's airports was now running so hot the federal government felt compelled to respond. Even though parliament was engaged in conducting an inquiry, the then Deputy Prime Minister, John Anderson, called the former head of Britain's national criminal intelligence service Sir John Wheeler and asked him to lead a review of airport security and policing. Sir John had conducted a similar review for the Blair government. The nation now had two inquiries covering the same issues.

As amusing as the camel incident may have seemed, members of the Public Accounts and Audit Committee weren't laughing and neither were any of those involved in an already security-bound aviation industry.

In fact, a key theme to emerge from the submissions to the re-minted parliamentary inquiry is that many pilots, carriers and airport owners believe politicians are being driven by the media to airport security overkill. They want the committee to distinguish between acts of criminality and terrorism and respond accordingly.

The Australian Airports Association submission to the parliamentary inquiry says the number of genuine aviation security incidents in the past year has been minimal and those that received a lot of publicity were not security breaches but common criminality.

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"In very simple terms, no matter the operational and geographic definition of the airport, the cost impacts of security upgrades will ultimately be passed on to the airline passenger," the submission says. "In most instances, these cost impacts have not arisen as a result of an assessment process, rather as a mistakenly perceived need to increase aviation security as a knee-jerk reaction to 'do good' politicians and an ill-informed, headline-hungry media."

The man in the eye of the storm, Sydney Airport chief executive Max Moore-Wilton, sees the absence of community policing at his airport as a large hole in existing arrangements.

"Without an effective crime prevention unit operating with the necessary resources and powers of state and federal law enforcement agencies, organised to specifically address criminal activity at airports, passengers, staff, members of the public and other users will translate the alleged weakness in preventing criminal activity to an overall lack of aviation security in its broadest definition," his submission says.

Policing at airports emerged as one of the key issues when Sir John Wheeler reported to

The camel's head worn by a baggage handler in Sydney. Photo: Jay Town, Newspix

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cabinet on September 20. He said it was “often inadequate and dysfunctional, and security systems are typically uncoordinated”.

“The roots of this include bureaucratic turf protection and unresolved Commonwealth/state conflicts over resources,” his report says.

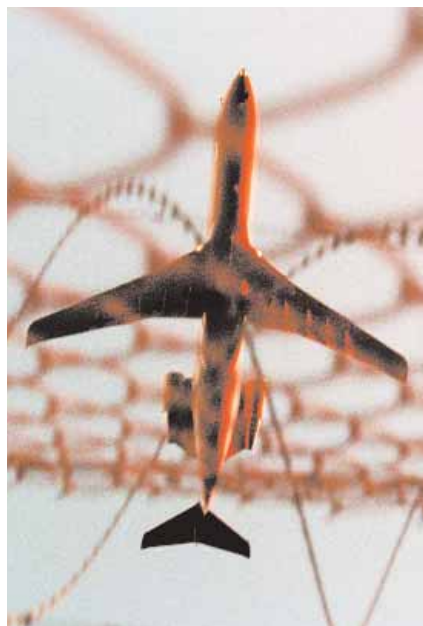
One of Wheeler’s key recommendations was the appointment of Airport Police Commanders and the integration of Commonwealth and state policing at all major Australian airports. Prime Minister John Howard said he was committed to the recommendation but achieving it would require close cooperation with state and territory governments.

That cooperation was swift in coming. At a specially convened meeting of the Council of Australian Governments on September 27, the nation’s premiers and chief ministers strongly supported the findings in the Wheeler report, particularly a single command structure at Australian airports.

COAG agreed:

- to establish a unified policing model at each of the 11 counter-terrorism first response (CTFR) airports including: an Airport Police Commander, a dedicated Joint Intelligence Group, a CTFR capability and a permanent community policing presence, and a Joint Airport Investigation Team at each of the five major international airports (Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide);
- that the Commonwealth will fund under the unified model a full-time community policing presence of Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers wearing AFP uniforms under AFP command at all 11 CTFR airports;
- that recruitment and selection of the Airport Police Commander will be undertaken by a panel which will include both Commonwealth and state or territory representation;
- that the arrangements for the secondment or recruitment of state and territory police to the AFP command will be finalised by the National Counter Terrorism Committee in consultation with police commissioners as soon as practicable;

- to conduct via the NCTC a review of information and intelligence-sharing processes between Commonwealth and state and territory agencies to facilitate better information flow to counter crime and terrorism in the aviation sector and to report back to COAG by mid-2006; and



- that the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet would lead an NCTC working group comprising relevant Commonwealth, state and territory agencies to prepare a report on possible further refinements to terrorist incident response and crisis management arrangements at CTFR airports and report back to COAG by mid-2006.

Of course all this extra security is expensive and the Commonwealth has committed \$200 million to a range of security upgrades at airports. At the time of writing, airline and airport industry bodies were uncertain whether this would completely cover costs.

One thing they were clear on was that if any costs were passed to them they would pass them on to passengers by way of higher ticket prices.

Australian Pacific Airports, which owns Melbourne and Launceston airports, speaks for all airports and airlines when its submission to the ongoing parliamentary inquiry says, “additional costs for security should be borne by government”.

“The requirements for aviation security in Australia are inappropriately high compared with the level of threat and other Australian infrastructure,” the submission says. “Aviation security is a national issue and additional costs should be borne at least in part by the Commonwealth.”

Those costs have been on the march since the attack on New York’s twin towers on 11 September 2001, but have risen higher still after the *Aviation Transport Security Act 2004* came into effect on 10 March 2005.

Bureaucratic duplication in aviation security is not confined to policing and is beginning to chaff. Nowhere does it chaff as much as at the point where pilots meet the Aviation Security Identification Card. Under the new rules anyone employed in airports is required to display, or be escorted by a person with, a card. All holders, including pilots, are required to undergo an ASIO security check, as well as criminal history and immigration checks.

However, many pilots’ submissions point out that they already have identical security checks for their pilot’s licence.

Pilot, Steve Hitchen speaks for them when he writes, “Under new regulations private pilot licence holders are required to undergo background security checks in order to gain a photo licence. This process is conducted by CASA. These checks are nearly identical to those required by the Department of Transport and Regional Services (DOTARS) for the issue of an ASIC. However, DOTARS have elected to compel pilots to get ASICs so they can move around the airport tarmac.

“In short, pilots will need one security check to fly the aeroplane and another one to get out and walk across the tarmac. On nobody’s planet does this make sense.”

The anger of some pilots erupts out of their submissions, like that penned by Peter Kerwin.

“As a captain in a regional airline for nearly 30 years I never thought the day would come when I would be ‘frisked’ for items that may ‘allow’ me to take control of my own aircraft.

“Last night and again this morning, in the course of his tarmac control and passenger sheet duties, and



Australian Federal police patrol Sydney's international airport. Photo: Mark Baker, AP/AAP

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while wearing his ASIC in plain view, my first officer was reduced to his shirt and socks, and with his hat, jacket, belt and shoes in the x-ray machine, forced to clutch his trousers as he finally passed successfully through the scanner. This embarrassing public process is to be repeated every time we land at a major airport in Australia.

“Although my first officer has to suffer the indignity more often, tomorrow morning before I proceed to my aircraft I will have to take myself and my flight bag through the same electronic gauntlet in case I have something with me that could compromise the security and safety of the aircraft. Having replaced all my pocket paraphernalia, shoes and spectacles, and secured my trouser belt, I shall then proceed to the aircraft to spend the day ensuring the aircraft and its occupants do not come to any harm. I do this strapped in a seat less than 10cm from a nice sharp crash axe and a pressurised fire extinguisher installed there for everyone’s safety.

“I feel the authorities have lost sight not just of the security ball, but forgotten what the game even is. Professional licensed aircrew are now treated as the enemy, it seems. We cannot be trusted with nail clippers, but we can be let loose with a plane load of passengers.”

Another beef is the one size fits all approach to airport security. Australiawide Airlines Ltd, trading as Regional Express, operates across the spectrum of airports and says departmental officials have more corporate experience with major domestic and international aviation than they do with regional aviation. The carrier says there is “concern within industry ... that certain criminal acts with no direct or indirect threat to aviation may be included under the title of aviation security, simply because they occur at an airport.

“The compulsory universal inclusion of measures to counter non aviation security issues will cost industry considerable sums for, in REX’s case, no gain and could mean the difference between some regional airlines operating or ceasing to operate.”

The example cited is the new security screening regulations, introduced in March. REX estimates that between 1 March and 30 June this year those requirements resulted in 298 minutes of delay, at a cost to the carrier of \$45 a minute, or nearly \$14,000.

In addition, REX estimates training staff in the new regulations costs a further \$150,000 a year and offers limited benefits.

As already noted, the *Australian* printed a leaked Customs report shortly after the inquiry reopened which said that workers at Sydney airport, including baggage handlers with high-level security clearances, had been involved in drug smuggling and stealing from passengers.

The submission from the Customs Officers Association says it sent a notice to members inviting them to provide further information about airport security concerns. It goes on to say the Australian Customs Service then sent out a note to all staff saying they should lodge complaints about system failures and poor practices with management. The association sees this as “not even a thinly veiled threat for officers to be silent” and to frustrate the work of the committee.

Customs has disputed the interpretation put on the memo but Committee Chair Bob Baldwin has fired a warning by publicly reminding everyone that interfering with the work of a committee could be construed as contempt of parliament.

He has also said he understands that security risks and regulation needed to be balanced with cost to the aviation industry.

“There is no way in the world that you are going to provide a guaranteed 100 per cent secure system,” Mr Baldwin said. “If people have intent they will always make an attempt and you have to look at risk profiles and risk analysis in directing your efforts.

“That being said, we also need to balance risk with cost. I’m mindful the government doesn’t have an endless bucket of money.”

And what of the fact that the Wheeler inquiry has already made a series of recommendations to improve aviation security to which the government has responded?

Mr Baldwin said he welcomed the Wheeler report and the government’s response to it, but indicated that the parliamentary inquiry would continue.

“We are looking forward to continuing our inquiry into aviation security, which is drilling deeper into the issues surrounding terrorist threats, security, and criminal activity at airports, and looking in greater detail at security coordination and practices in airports across Australia,” he said. ■

For more information on the aviation security inquiry by the Public Accounts and Audit Committee, visit www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/jpaa/aviation_security2 or email jcpa@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4615.