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From Wiltshire to Red Alert At Heathrow Airport

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Wiltshire County, England, peaceful landscape of cereal crop farms.

August 12 , 2006 Albuquerque, New Mexico - At 5:30 a.m. on Thursday morning, August 10, I was traveling in my rental car from Wiltshire County, England, to Heathrow Airport in London. I had been in southern England for two weeks to explore crop formations and do more research on the mysterious red rain of Kerala, India. [See: **Earthfiles061606** and upcoming new report.]

The big, white, full moon was setting over the Vale of Pewsey and the sun was rising in pink and gold clouds as I reached the M-4 freeway back to London. The car radio was playing peaceful classical music when there was a news interruption about a British intelligence discovery that terrorists planned to blow up airliners en route from England to the United States. The three targeted airlines were United, American and Continental. My flight was United, scheduled to leave in about five hours. Scotland Yard and MI-5 had suddenly made a decision that morning to order British airlines to ban *all* liquids and food from carry on that might be used as explosive chemicals. Passengers would be restricted to a passport, airline ticket, small billfold and not much else which had to be in a clear plastic bag. Everything else had to be checked. Further, it was not clear if any flights would be allowed from Heathrow to the United States.

Stunned, I looked at the large case and shoulder bag I had planned, as always, to keep with me that contained my cameras and other valuable gear, along with a full water bottle. There was no room in my check-on suitcases for any of it. At that moment, I wondered if I should take the next exit to any town other than London and wait out the crisis. But my gut said: Keep going. You could get trapped in a deteriorating situation.

A few miles from Heathrow, the traffic was slowed to barely moving and even police cars and ambulances were stuck in the jam with their alarm lights turning. When I finally got my rental car to Avis, no one knew if any American-bound airliners would fly. But an Avis manager said, "You should try to get to United and see because this situation could last for a long time."



One of hundreds of police and military patrolling outside and inside Heathrow Airport, London, on August 10, 2006. Early that morning, British intelligence revealed a terrorist plot to blow up airliners en route from Britain to the United States. The threat level was raised to highest Red.
Image © 2006 by Stephen Hird, Reuters.

When I got to the terminal, there were military men carrying machine guns and police with large rifles. Trained dogs were sniffing luggage everywhere in the crowd and barking, making me wonder what the dogs had found that could blow up any of the airliners we were trying to board. The atmosphere was potential catastrophe. All of us were trying to wrap carry-on we did not want to leave behind in makeshift bundles, bound by airline tape and labeled with paper name tags. It was a leap of faith in crisis that somehow the airline baggage system would be able to keep track of all those last minute packages sent along conveyor belts to airlines that might, or might not, fly.



All carry-on was reduced to passport, airline ticket, and small billfold to be carried in clear plastic bags handed out at Heathrow.
Image © 2006 by David Moir, Reuters.

A valuable book I had purchased in a small Avebury bookstore was confiscated with the firm warning: "No books allowed!" When I asked why, the security officer said angrily, "We don't know why, but it's an order. No books!" I begged to keep it and more security people came to me. "There are no exceptions." I asked, "Could you mail it to me?" Finally, one of the female security said she would try to mail it and took my address card. That confiscation of books is an ironic metaphor of the police state mentality that is beginning to overtake western industrialized nations in the war for freedom in Iraq and other radical terrorist spawning grounds. Can cellulose in book paper be used by terrorists to make bombs from shampoo, toothpaste and other common liquids? No one seemed to know.

For two hours, we all waited not knowing if our United flight would be cleared for take off. The announcement to board came with urgency. Quickly the plane was filled up because no one had any carry-on. The big jet rolled toward a runway and then stopped with engines running. After about thirty minutes not moving, the pilot's dejected voice announced that we were in an unusual limbo state: Heathrow could not give clearance to take off until the FBI and Homeland Security in the United States gave permission for the United flight to land at Washington Dulles airport. The pilot also said that the United States had ordered military jets to fly over major East Coast cities to patrol incoming air traffic to America. If we took off, our flight would be only the second one from Heathrow to the U. S. on August 10. Most all other flights had been cancelled. We were trapped with jet engines running for ninety minutes, not knowing what would happen.

Finally, four hours late, United Flight 921 took off from Heathrow for Washington Dulles. When we landed, instead of cheers, there was an eerie silence from the passengers. If everyone else felt like I did, there was an aching sadness deep inside me about the insane minds that have changed the world so terribly in only five years - changes in which a few have been able to put the majority in repulsive, increasingly tightening straight jackets.

People in the big U. S. Customs room at Dulles were uncommonly quiet as well. Perhaps now everyone is afraid of being arrested, even for speaking innocent words amid so many armed police. I overheard one female security officer, with her large gun strapped to her hip and tears in her eyes, say to another security officer, "Today I even had to taste baby milk to see if it were real."

Credits

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