

# CATCHING THE BAD GUYS AT MIAMI AIRPORT



AIRPORT POLICE USE PORTABLE, COVERT SURVEILLANCE DEVICES TO REDUCE CARGO AND BAGGAGE THEFT.

**T**heft of or tampering with passenger luggage and air cargo is a major problem in the US and around the world. The US Government Accounting Office estimates that direct losses due to cargo theft, across all transportation modes, total \$10-25 billion annually in the US. Furthermore, many experts believe a large percentage of cargo theft is unreported.

Theft of passenger luggage is also a serious problem. According to DOT figures, baggage complaints per 1000 passengers were up nearly 10 percent in the first nine months of 2003 compared to 2002. This increase occurred after the federal government began advising passengers to leave their checked baggage unlocked for inspection.

Specific weaknesses in air cargo security have been highlighted in several high profile investigations

of cargo theft. Major cargo and baggage theft rings have been uncovered at JFK International Airport in New York, Logan International Airport in Boston and at Miami International Airport. In addition to theft, smuggling is also a problem for air cargo security. According to a Congressional Research Report on air cargo security, a large portion of cargo crime is committed by or with the assistance of cargo workers. Therefore, increased security measures such as enhanced physical security of cargo operations areas are likely to reduce cargo crimes and improve the detection of criminal activity in air cargo operations. The report also indicates that addressing specific cargo crime issues may also serve to deter terrorist threats to cargo shipments.

In terms of air cargo volume as well as transit passenger traffic, Miami-Dade International Airport,

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ranks number one in the country and is one of the largest airports in North America. The Crime Suppression Unit of the Miami-Dade Police Airport Division is tasked with the investigation and suppression of all crimes committed at the Miami-Dade Airport. These criminal activities cover the full spectrum, from theft of air cargo and passenger luggage, to auto thefts, racketeering and strong-armed robberies. The unit also supports the DEA, the Bureau of Immigration and Customs and other federal agencies in the investigation and suppression of smuggling, drug trafficking, illegal immigration and post 9/11 security issues.

According to Sergeant Kevin Doherty who heads the Crime Suppression Unit, criminals find concealed areas in airports or in the belly of aircraft where they are able to gain access to luggage without being detected. Over the past five years, the Crime Suppression Unit has relied increasingly on a portable, covert surveillance device called the Sentinel as a force multiplier and as a system for evidence gathering. The device, produced by Intelpresence Corp, is small, rugged and battery-powered so that it can be deployed quickly and covertly hidden just about anywhere. Its battery life is extended because it only becomes active when it senses the presence of people. The Sentinel can be set up in a video-record mode to simply gather evidence or it can be deployed in a wireless mode for real-time remote surveillance of suspicious activity.

“Unlike hard-wired surveillance cameras that are installed in fixed locations, these portable devices are constantly moved from place to place,” said Doherty. “Hard-wired systems are used primarily to monitor and facilitate the movement of passengers, but where surveillance and evidence-gathering is concerned, the usefulness of these fixed systems is

limited. If a crime is committed outside the field of vision of fixed systems, it will escape the view of the cameras. The bad guys will often know where these cameras are located and what their field of view is. Sometimes they will even turn the cameras in different directions.

“We can move the portable Sentinel cameras around quickly and then conceal them easily,” continued Doherty. “We can get very creative about concealing these covert devices so that they can’t be detected by the perpetrators. By hiding the Sentinel in aircraft cargo bays and baggage make-up areas, we’ve been able to put a lot of bad guys behind bars. And we have never had one of the concealed cameras discovered.

“The police need to be able to change quickly as the bad guys change their tactics,” added Doherty. “So we need to have surveillance systems that are versatile and easy to conceal. Rather than having a cop or a team or a squad of cops on overtime waiting for hours at a single surveillance location, several Sentinel devices can be deployed on several different missions at one time while being monitored through a wireless computer connection from a remote location. And of course the video tape provides killer evidence that is much more solid than eye witness accounts.” ■

Sentinel systems are a proprietary line of products that are produced by Intelpresence Corp. of Cambridge Vermont ([www.intelpresence.com](http://www.intelpresence.com)).