

A teen's flighty adventure raises worries over airport security

*San Jose Mercury News/Newsela Staff*

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A teenager caused a stir when he traveled to Hawaii in the wheel well of an airplane over the weekend. He was not on board with the other passengers. Instead, he jumped over a fence at San Jose International Airport. He then climbed into the bottom of the plane where the wheels are kept during flight. Now, his adventure is raising concerns about airport safety nationwide.

There have been several break-ins through airport fences across the country in recent years, but none of them were probably as dramatic as the incident Sunday. The Santa Clara, Calif., teenager survived a 5½-hour, nonstop flight to Maui, Hawaii.

"If somebody can come onto an airport and get to the wheel well of an airplane, then someone else can plant a bomb," said Brian Jenkins. He works for RAND Corp which assists the government with research about issues like national security.

### **Over The Fence**

San Jose's airport is surrounded by 6-foot fences. Some sections have barbed wire on top, according to airport spokeswoman Rosemary Barnes. At least some of the tarmac area is monitored by cameras, but airport officials were unaware that anyone made it on.

"We have 1,050 acres," Barnes said. "That's a lot of fence line. He could have scaled the fence line really through any area here at the airport. It's very easy to do so under the cover of darkness, and it appears that's what he did."

Barnes said there is footage of "an unidentified person walking on the airport ramp and approaching" the plane. But that footage was not discovered until after the Hawaiian Airlines Boeing 767 landed in Maui.

"If there is video of him going over the fence, why was there no response?" asked Jenkins. He also directs the National Transportation Security Center at San Jose State.

The U.S. Transportation Security Administration sets the rules for airport safety, but airports are responsible for enforcing them. This can vary from airport to airport, with their different geographies and distances from cities. But the break-in has raised questions about security at San Jose.

The embarrassing incident adds to a string of airport break-ins over the past few years. They have stirred concern in Congress.

"People shouldn't be able to just access a runway or airliner without getting through pretty tight security," said Rep. Eric Swalwell, D-Calif. He sits on the transportation subcommittee of the House Homeland Security Committee.

## Gate Crashers

The transportation subcommittee is drafting a request that the Government Accountability Office update its 2009 report on airport fence safety needs.

Since that report:

- A driver crashed through a gate onto the runway at Philadelphia airport.
- A jet skier emerged from the water and walked across two runways past cameras and motion detectors at JFK International Airport in New York.
- A 16-year-old stowaway got into a Boston-bound airplane's wheel well in Charlotte, N.C. He fell to his death as it approached Boston Logan Airport.
- A man dressed as a woman jumped a security fence at Newark Liberty International Airport in Newark, N.J. The break-in, although captured on video, wasn't known about for a day, according to reports.
- An inebriated 49-year-old man climbed a fence at Sky Harbor International Airport in Phoenix. He ran across the tarmac.

Some airports use infrared or radar sensing systems. Others rely on video cameras or even guard dogs and police patrols. No matter how complicated the systems, they still depend on individuals watching televisions or computers with video surveillance on them, experts said. Studies have found the attention span of someone watching a bank of 30 monitors is half an hour at best.

### "Better Gates"

Airport spokeswoman Barnes said Mineta's safety program "involves many (parts), including outer perimeter fencing, surveillance video equipment and more than 2,800 badge employees." The employees are trained to report safety concerns to police and airport staff. But those measures weren't enough to stop a teenager.

"Lots of airports around the U.S. depend on visible technology" or video cameras, said Roy Malmberg of FLIR. It is an Oregon company that makes night-viewing heat imaging and radar detection systems that some airports have adopted.

But these and other advanced systems are "pricey," noted John Hernandez. He is an aerospace and defense analyst at Frost and Sullivan, a global consulting firm that works with government contractors.

Airports in general don't place high importance on perimeter security, he said. Even after the latest incident, "I don't see them spending much money on any enhancements other than the basics," he said. "Maybe some new cameras, some new key cards, better gates, better fences."

A perimeter for a large airport can be miles. "I suspect that if you put all of the airport perimeters together you'd have something that's longer than the Mexican border," Hernandez said.