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THE MIDDLE SEAT WEDNESDAY

Where a Cop's Beat Includes a Tarmac

By Scott McCartney



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Los Angeles International Airport

The calls come in just like those at any big-city police department: drunk and disorderly people, theft and assault, illegally parked cars, medical crises and possible terrorist threats.

But for airport police officers, there are particular challenges. Airports are cities unto themselves, with millions of people and yet no permanent residents. When crimes happen, airport police have to move especially swiftly to get detailed statements from victims or witnesses, many of whom may never return for a court appearance. Within hours they may be on the other side of the world.



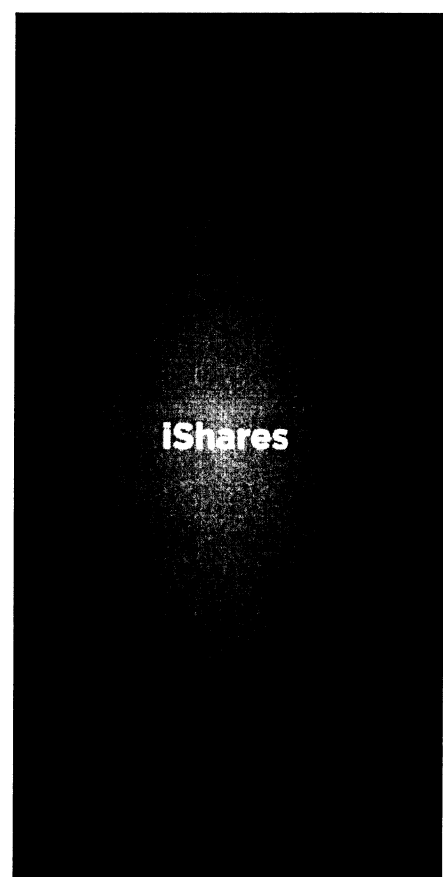
Los Angeles airport police Officer Efrén Orlanes and Brody check a passenger's luggage.

"One of the biggest differences is the short amount of time an airport police officer has to decide whether to arrest or not. It's not like a guy goes home down the street and you can arrest him tomorrow," said Paul Mason, chief of police at Lambert-St. Louis International Airport and president of Airport Law Enforcement Agencies Network (ALEAN), an association of airport police chiefs.

Every airport police officer is focused first on bombs and terrorism. They question people who are photographing airplanes and conduct random searches of cars that sometimes turn up illegal guns and drugs. And they do everything from running speed traps on airport taxiways to catch reckless drivers of baggage carts and catering trucks to cracking down on smoking taxi drivers. Their numbers have swelled since the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Los Angeles International Airport, for example, went from about 100 sworn officers before the Sept. 11 attacks to 430 today. The airport force is now the fourth-largest in Los Angeles county.

Spending a day riding along with the Los Angeles airport police, one of the nation's largest airport-specific police forces, showed some of the challenges. The LAX police force allowed a reporter to accompany a sergeant responding to various calls all over the vast airport. Officers jump from routine slip-and-fall injury calls to checking on secure doors improperly opened to questioning travelers caught with illegal items at Transportation Security Administration checkpoints.

Warning to travelers and people just picking up or dropping off at an airport: Even an expired registration sticker can buy you trouble at airports these days.



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About Scott McCartney

Scott McCartney writes The Middle Seat every Thursday. The Wall Street Journal's Travel Editor, Scott has been on the airline beat since 1995 -- long enough to see it go from bust to boom and back to bust. He also writes a blog on travel at The Middle Seat Terminal.

Officers try hard to make their presence highly visible, patrolling on foot, Segway scooters, bicycles, motorcycles and cars. Traffic is a major concern at any airport because people get out of cars and stand in streets to say good-byes or handle luggage without paying attention to other motorists. On a recent day, a mother struggling with suitcases let her children run loose on a curb: The youngsters almost fell in front of a police car.



Sgt. Belinda Nettles honked and glared at the woman, who grabbed her kids. "It gets crazy out here," Sgt. Nettles said.

When it comes to traffic, LAX worries the most about car and truck bombs. To discourage that, police conduct frequent vehicle checkpoints—locations and times are randomly selected by a counter-terrorism software program.

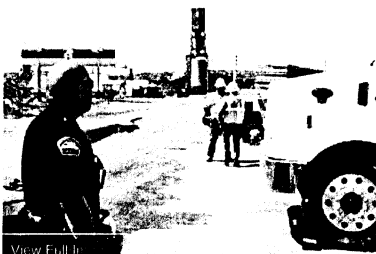
Officers look closely at large vehicles, trucks and SUVs, and also perform random checks of vehicles that do not appear to be a threat. They've never found a bomb, but they have found plenty of weapons and drugs. LAX police recently discovered 40 illegal guns in the trunk of one car. Officers sometimes make arrests for drunk driving.

Though the searches aren't intended to find guns or drugs or test sobriety, officers also can't ignore what they see in the course of their airport checks. "You never know what you may come across," said Sgt. Nettles.

In addition to police officers, many airport departments—about half of big airports have their own specialized force and half use regular city police, according to ALEAN—now have large forces of bomb-sniffing dogs. The dogs typically come from overseas and know key commands in languages from German to Czech to Dutch to Hebrew. LAX has 30 dogs—who live with their handlers—on its force.

About once a day, dogs are called on to check out unattended bags at LAX. Before the dogs joined the force, airport police had to call the Los Angeles Police Department bomb squad and wait for them to arrive. In the meantime, areas would be cordoned off, sometimes disrupting travel across the country if terminals had to be evacuated and flights grounded. Now, if the dog indicates that the bag is OK, it is simply taken away to storage.

"We trust our dogs 100%," said Officer Efren Orlanes, who is the handler for a dog named Brody.



Los Angeles airport police Officer Jordan Espiritu at the scene of a minor construction accident.

Dogs also patrol regularly, sniffing garbage cans, passenger bags, construction equipment, vehicles and anywhere else a bomb might be hidden. Officers keep dogs on leashes—letting them run loose can scare people. But getting attention is part of the intent. "It makes the bad guys want to go elsewhere," Officer Orlanes said.

The TSA finds banned items in carry-on luggage several times a day on average at LAX. Most knives are simply confiscated. But officers will arrest people carrying illegal weapons like switchblades and guns. TSA

mandates that local police always be within a five-minute response time to a TSA checkpoint, but LAX stations officers at desks behind screening lanes full-time.

Typically, when a weapon is discovered in a bag, the owner says he or she simply forgot it was there. On a recent day, a 63-year-old woman carrying brass knuckles designed to look like a children's toy said her husband gave the item to her and she forgot she had it. The woman was questioned by police and released to catch her flight after TSA confiscated the potential weapon.

"Sometimes it's the real deal and sometimes it's nothing," Sgt. Nettles said.

Theft from security areas is another major crime concern. It happens every day at LAX—someone leaves a wallet exposed in security screening bins, and someone else walks off with it. Bags are taken—sometimes it's an accident, other times it's theft.

"Crimes of opportunity have always been here," said LAX Police Chief George Centeno.

Officers now can check security screening area video almost instantly and print color pictures of whoever picked up the item. Descriptions are broadcast and officers fan out through terminals.

Scott won the Online News Association award for online commentary in 2003 for "The Middle Seat," the George Polk Award for transportation reporting in 2000, and has been honored by the Deadline Club and New York's chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists. Before joining the Journal in 1993, he spent 11 years at The Associated Press.

Scott, a native of Boston and graduate of Duke University, is the author of four books, including *The Wall Street Journal Guide to Power Travel: How to Arrive with Your Dignity, Sanity, and Wallet Intact*, which was published in 2009. He's also an instrument-rated private pilot.

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"We can find people really fast and often get the object back," said Officer Shawn Smith, a crime scene investigator.

Officers are often stopped by travelers seeking information about hotels, connecting flights, ground transportation or any other information-desk type query. The department trains officers on tourist-type information, from hotel locations to bus schedules.

But tourists are sometimes viewed with suspicion as well. Police monitor the perimeter of the airport and question anyone taking pictures. "We want to make sure they are out there for the right reason and not the wrong," said Chief Centeno.

Officers also patrol parking garages and have vehicles with expired registrations towed. The LAX force has a unit to police limos and taxis—and it shows zero tolerance. On a recent day, motorcycle officer Andre Munn pulled over and ticketed a town car because its charter license numbers on the back of the car were smaller than the required size. (The fine can be waived if the car's operator corrects the problem.)

LAX has more than its share of another airport curiosity: paparazzi. Airport police officers are quick to say they don't provide security for Hollywood celebrities. But officers do have to control crowds.

One trick to foil the paparazzi: the international terminal has an elevator used by staff that can also get arriving celebrities out of the building without them having to go through the public arrivals area. Sometimes famous people want to slip out, or at least send their children out secretly, officials say. Yet many times attention-seeking stars want to run the gauntlet of photographers.

Write to Scott McCartney at middleseat@wsj.com

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