

# **'FRIENDLY' BORDER UNDER NEW SCRUTINY VEHICLES CROSSING BETWEEN U.S. AND CANADA FACE UNFAMILIAR SEARCHES AND LONG LINES**

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**Byline:** KRISTI HEIM, Mercury News Seattle Bureau

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## **Body**

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On the brilliant green lawn of Peace Arch Park, on the western edge of the longest undefended border in the world, it's hard to tell where the United States ends and Canada begins.

On a typical sunny day, tourists stroll around, snapping pictures in front of two national flags made of colorful flowers, and visitors toss frisbees from one side to the other. In the past, most drivers breezed through the inspection gates, greeting guards with little more than a friendly hello.

But after Tuesday's terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, border crossing has become entirely different. Lines stretched for a mile on either side as drivers were questioned and cars searched by three to four armed border inspectors. The delays were met with little complaint.

The U.S. Customs Service and the Immigration and Naturalization Service remained on the highest level security alert, officials said. In an unusual step Thursday, Royal Canadian Mounted Police armed with handguns accompanied Canadian customs officials at checkpoints.

The Canadian border is likely to become the focus of intense scrutiny. Government officials suspect five people involved in the hijacking of U.S. planes Tuesday had passed into Maine from Canada.

But border control officials struggle with limited resources and personnel.

Republican Sen. Susan Collins of Maine said the Immigration and Naturalization Service estimates that the nation's 104 land ports of entry are staffed at only 49 percent of their optimal level. On Thursday, her request for \$25.4 million to hire 348 border inspectors nationwide was included in a Senate appropriations bill.

This week's event isn't the first time suspected terrorists would have entered the country through Canada. Two years ago, Ahmed Ressam drove off a ferry from Victoria, British Columbia, into Port Angeles, Wash.

Ressam later said he had planned to bomb the Los Angeles International Airport.

It was only because Ressam panicked, and his nervousness caught the attention of a U.S. Customs agent, that his plan was foiled. "There was a great deal of serendipity in that arrest," said Vincent Cannistraro, a former chief of counterterrorism for the Central Intelligence Agency.

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Ressam entered Canada with a false passport in 1994. He was arrested several times, but he was still able to cross the border almost without incident.

"It's good to have a friendly border like that," said Cannistraro. "You hate to have it to the point where there are long lines as people are searched, but if Canadians don't make the security advancements in both the people they allow in and surveillance of known operatives, that's probably the only alternative."

Locals had become accustomed to simple and quick border crossings at Peace Arch, where 3.3 million people cross each year. Canadians from British Columbia cross in search of cheap beer, gas or milk. Washington residents drive north for deals on furniture and building supplies.

The wait was as long as three hours Thursday, but most drivers said they didn't mind. "Let them search the car," said Jack Mannering of Pleasant Hill. "This is the price we're going to be paying in the future."

Some travelers were skeptical that the intense security would continue for long.

Wesley Chen, a real estate agent from Surrey, British Columbia, said, "I used to pass once a month and they didn't even check your I.D."

But the Ressam case was "an eye opener," and now there is even greater pressure, said John Bates, deputy chief of the U.S. Border Patrol's Blaine section, which covers western Washington, Oregon and Alaska.

"We're there to do the best job we possibly can," said Bates. "Can we guarantee that someone is not going to get through? No."

## Notes

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Attack on America : 32-Page Section

RELATED STORY: page 1A-4A, 6A, 8A-23A, 25A-28A, 32A, 1C, 3C, 5C, 1D, 8E

The Aftermath

Mercury News wire services contributed to this report.

## Graphic

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Photo;

PHOTO: DAN JANISSE -- ASSOCIATED PRESS

Truck traffic is backed up for about nine miles Thursday along Highway 401 heading into Windsor, Ontario, Canada. Stringent searches slowed traffic along the U.S.-Canadian border, but vehicles moved freely in both directions.

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