At Phila. airport, acting on instinct;

Airport inspectors place priority on their instincts

Immigration officers have stepped up their scrutiny since Sept. 11.

The Philadelphia Inquirer

November 23, 2001 Friday CITY-D EDITION

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Found on Philly.com

Section: LOCAL; Pg. A01

Length: 1354 words

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Body

Abdul Abbass, an ***immigration*** ***inspector*** at ***Philadelphia*** International ***Airport***, felt his heart sink ***Sept. 11***. He knew the country might never be the same.

And neither would his job.

"They could have walked right past me," Abbass said about the hijackers as he stood behind Booth No. 8 in the ***immigration*** inspection hall at the ***airport***. "If one of those guys had a visa, there's nothing we could do. I feel like we haven't done enough to control all these people. But we have limited powers."

Abbass is a soldier of sorts, posted on one of the new front lines of America's war on terrorism. He is among about 4,800 ***Immigration*** and Naturalization Service ***inspectors*** nationwide who in minutes must pick out would-be terrorists, and other undesirables, from hundreds of millions of ordinary travelers at more than 300 ports of entry, mostly ***airports***.

Since the attacks, ***immigration officers*** at ***airports***, border crossings and INS offices have been checking passports, scrutinizing visas, and ordering investigations and detentions with what some concede is greater anxiety and suspicion.

It's a needle-in-a-haystack task, with a nervous nation watching over ***immigration officers***' shoulders. Using a database that was proven inadequate by the ***Sept. 11*** attacks, ***inspectors*** must depend more than ever on nuances and gut feelings about the strangers standing in front of them.

Abbass, 50, a native of Ghana who has been an INS ***inspector*** for about three years, said the number of people he sends back for more questioning in a secure area behind his booth is almost double what it was before ***Sept. 11***.

"Most of them still get admitted, but it still feels right to do it," Abbass said. "I feel inside that I have to do more. I feel like I have to take more time with each person. People will complain about standing in line. But it doesn't matter. I have to send more back. My ***instinct*** tells me to."

Abbass' supervisors could not verify his estimate and insisted the number of travelers ordered for more questioning is not much different than before ***Sept. 11***. INS officials, however, did say lines at arrival halls may be longer because of more questions.

"Nothing changed," said Fran X. McGowan, a port supervisor at the ***Philadelphia airport***. He said the terrorism "scares everybody, but this is our job."

In recent years, international flights to ***Philadelphia*** have risen several-fold, and the INS has raced to keep ***up***. A new international terminal opening next year will raise the number of inspection booths from 14 to 56. At least one airline, US Airways, has expressed concern about INS readiness.

"If the ***immigration*** people are not at their booths, it will be a funnel effect [at the arrival hall], and that is not good for us," city Aviation Director Charles J. Isdell said at a conference this month.

Niki Edwards, the ***Philadelphia*** INS spokeswoman, said the jobs would be filled. "We are hiring; we're filling our numbers. There's no concern on our part," she said.

Nieves Cardinale, the INS area port director, took a practical approach: "I'll take as many as they give me. The more the better."

Out of several thousand travelers lining ***up*** daily under the fluorescent lights of the carpeted inspection area, a half-dozen typically get sent for more questioning beyond the inspection booths to a "secondary area" with a waiting room and detention cells, the INS said.

Almost all check out with, at worst, minor visa or passport problems and are let in. But at least one or two a day get nabbed for something worse, INS officials said. The questioning is a necessary trade-off between convenience and security, even though hapless travelers may get caught in it.

Among them, apparently, was an elderly couple from India who came to ***Philadelphia*** 10 days after the attacks to visit their daughter in Montgomery County. They arrived in ***Philadelphia*** as the nation seethed over revelations that some hijackers had gotten in on temporary visas.

In an account provided by their daughter on condition names not be printed and confirmed by aides to U.S. Rep. Joseph Hoeffel (D., Pa.), who has intervened in the case, the couple for some reason raised the suspicion of ***inspectors*** at the ***Philadelphia airport***.

Both are doctors who already had made several trips to ***Philadelphia*** on multiple-entry visas issued by the U.S. Embassy in Malta. Although both are Indian citizens, they live and work in Libya, whose government is listed as a supporter of terrorism by the State Department.

The ***inspector*** put their documents into a bright red folder and sent them to the secondary area. After questioning, the couple said, they were cleared by FBI agents.

But INS ***officers***, who at one point called the couple a "threat to national security," denied them entry and ordered them to leave on the next flight. After a night in a nearby county jail, just before takeoff, the mother finally got a chance to talk to her distraught daughter - a call that was cut off in mid-sentence.

Hoeffel's office has been told that INS ***officers*** "***acted*** appropriately" on unspecified information from the State Department. The INS declined to release more information without the family's permission.

Whatever the reason for the couple's expulsion, suspicion dominates an ***inspector***'s work.

"How to catch people lying - that's the toughest thing to learn," said Ken Krauss, 23, a rookie ***inspector*** originally from ***Philadelphia*** who recently was granted his wish to work at the ***Philadelphia airport***. "The majority of the people are telling the truth. But I definitely feel I'm getting better at catching lies."

With the traveler standing before them, the ***inspectors***, who are versed in everything from firearms to foreign passports, start by examining documents for any sign of tampering. The ***inspector*** looks at the date of issue and stamps from other countries, and can type the traveler's name into a computer inside the booth connected to an FBI "lookout list."

The ***inspector*** then asks the purpose of the trip, the destination, the departure date, and any other question that might expose an issue and merit more ***scrutiny***.

The most subtle thing can raise an eyebrow: a slight pause before answering, a reluctance to look eye-to-eye, a business traveler using a brand-new passport, a person fidgeting in line and staring at the ***inspector***.

"If they're shifting in line, they may be thinking, 'He's checking tougher,' or they may be looking at the stripes on the shirt," Krauss said. "It's part of the fun. It's getting people to admit to things they might not want to."

The only post-***Sept. 11*** operational change, INS officials said, was an order for each ***inspector*** to carry a sidearm (standard issue is a Beretta 9mm). Before, local supervisors had discretion over who should be armed on the job.

Cardinale, the port director, insisted there have been no orders for closer ***scrutiny*** of passengers from the Middle East or South Asia, even though the State Department reportedly has increased its investigation of visa applicants from those areas.

"There's no profiling," said Cardinale, herself the daughter of Spanish immigrants. "Honestly, I take everybody individually. I can't take a group from that part of the world and think anything because they could be completely innocent."

Inspectors conceded people do get through illegally. But they relished telling about the ones who didn't.

McGowan recounted how, a few years ago, he confronted a U.S.-passport holder who claimed to have been born in America but spoke with a heavy West African accent. Despite doubts, McGowan had to grant entry because ***inspectors*** at the time had no way to quickly compare the photo in his passport to the application's original.

A year later, with a photo-reference system in ***place***, McGowan was astonished to see the same man arriving again - using a different U.S. passport.

"We got him a year later, so that's good," McGowan said. "Your gut is right, but it's tough sometimes to prove it."

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Inquirer staff writer Jere Downs contributed to this article.

Graphic

PHOTO;

The number of INS ***inspectors*** needed will increase because of a new terminal.

GERALD S. WILLIAMS, Inquirer Staff Photographer

Passengers arriving from Paris wait in line at customs at ***Philadelphia*** International ***Airport***. "I feel like I have to take more time with each person," said one ***immigration inspector***.

Inspector Nelson Gomez stamps a passenger's passport after questions and other checks.

Nieves Cardinale, INS area port director, said there are no orders to closer scrutinize people from the Middle East or South Asia.

GERALD S. WILLIAMS, Inquirer Staff Photographer

Abdul Abbass, an ***immigration*** ***inspector*** at ***Philadelphia*** International ***Airport***, hands a passport to a colleague while he checks the computer.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: ***IMMIGRATION*** (93%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (90%); TERRORISM (90%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); HIJACKING (78%); AVIATION ADMINISTRATION (78%); ***SEPTEMBER 11*** ATTACK (78%); BORDER CONTROL (75%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (73%)

Company: U S AIRWAYS GROUP INC (50%)

Organization: ***IMMIGRATION*** & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (91%); ***IMMIGRATION*** & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (56%)

Ticker: LCC (NYSE) (50%)

Industry: ***AIRPORTS*** (94%); AIRLINES (89%); AVIATION ADMINISTRATION (78%); INTERNATIONAL TOURISM (78%)

Geographic: GHANA (79%); UNITED STATES (79%)

Load-Date: November 26, 2001