

## AIR INDIA INQUIRY

# RCMP jeopardized key informant, CSIS spy says

Agent was forced to reveal to police identity of source who claimed to have information on bombings

BY BILL CURRY OTTAWA

A Canadian spy who cultivated Sikh informants after the 1985 Air India terrorist attack told an inquiry yesterday that the RCMP cost him his most promising source for identifying the bombers.

Neil Eshleman was a Canadian Security Intelligence Service agent in Vancouver when he met a nervous source identified yesterday as Mr. A, who he felt could help penetrate the Sikh extremist movement. The man wanted his anonymity guaranteed and said he would not testify in court.

But Mr. Eshleman said he was ordered to turn the source

over to the RCMP, who insisted they needed to speak to the man directly and sent two officers, unannounced, to Mr. A's home, where he lived with others. The Mounties concluded the man was of no help to their criminal investigation.

Mr. Eshleman said Mr. A had the "single most potential" of any CSIS source related to Air India and Sikh extremism to date.

"It was a lost opportunity that shouldn't have occurred," Mr. Eshleman testified yesterday, describing the events as "exasperating" and "pretty tragic, actually."

The public inquiry into the Air India bombing heard the dramatic story yesterday after

several days of negotiations between federal lawyers and the commission. The Department of Justice objected to a public airing of how CSIS and the RCMP handled specific Air India sources, including Mr. A and others who will be discussed this week.

The commission and government lawyers ultimately agreed to release some of the documents and to proceed with public testimony.

Mr. Eshleman said Mr. A told him that he would not speak with police, but could provide key intelligence on the bombing suspects and promised to maintain contact with them to gather further intelligence. To prove his worth, he offered a



## ***It was a lost opportunity that shouldn't have occurred.***

CSIS agent Neil Eshleman

piece of information that Mr. Eshleman was able to confirm.

The potential informant said his anonymity had to be assured to protect his safety, a concern Mr. Eshleman said yesterday was legitimate.

But Mr. Eshleman told the inquiry that the promising relationship ended abruptly through the actions of the

RCMP, particularly their surprise arrival on Mr. A's doorstep, with badges flashing.

Documents from the two officers acknowledged the visit did not go well. "We got off on wrong foot," states an RCMP memo.

Mr. Eshleman said the surprise visit was not the way to develop such a key source and would make his housemates immediately suspicious of Mr. A.

"As a source handler with considerable background, it's not what I would have done," Mr. Eshleman said.

"If you are trying to develop Mr. A as a source, you're wanting to develop a rapport with him. You're not getting

off on a particularly comfortable setting if you're placing him in an uncomfortable position."

Documents show Mr. A continued to have contact with the RCMP after the first encounter, but it is not clear how the relationship ended.

The commission is expected to hear today from Robert Wall, one of the two RCMP officers. Documents show Mr. Wall concluded that Mr. A didn't say anything at the doorstep because he didn't have any knowledge of the bombing.

Mr. Eshleman, who now works for the RCMP, said Mr. Wall's conclusions were premature.