

Air-India bomb was cleared for loading

by Robin Morgan

A SUITCASE bomb which detonated on board an Air-India jumbo jet approaching Heathrow last June, killing 329 people, was detected by security equipment *before* it was loaded in the baggage hold. But an inexperienced operator had not been trained to recognise the alarm.

Investigations by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police have been charted in a new book, *The Death of Air India Flight 182*, by a Vancouver-based journalist, Salim Jiwa (to be published by WH Allen this week). Jiwa worked closely with *The Sunday Times* Insight team which investigated the crash last year and which first revealed that the cause of the disaster was a bomb placed in the forward cargo hold, next to the electronics bulkhead — the so-called "Achilles heel" of the jumbo jet.

The book reveals that a Sikh terrorist harassed a check-in clerk so much that she allowed the suitcase carrying the bomb to board the flight even though the Sikh did not have a confirmed seat on the aircraft.

The terrorists planted two bombs on flights out of Vancouver airport last June. Both flights were due to connect with Air-India flights, from Montreal to Delhi via Toronto and Heathrow and from Tokyo to Delhi via Bangkok.

The first bomb exploded after the plane had landed at Narita airport, Tokyo, killing two baggage handlers. The second bomb should have exploded at Heathrow, but flight 182 took off more than an hour late. The bomb exploded 31,000ft above the Atlantic, 120 miles south of Cork in the Irish republic, as it approached British air space.

The Mounties' investi-

tion established that a passenger, calling himself Singh, had checked in a suitcase on the first leg of the journey from Vancouver. Jeannie Adams, a check-in assistant, told detectives: "He was confirmed on the flight to Montreal but was on the holding list for the Air-India flight on to Delhi. He wanted the bag checked right through to Delhi and I told him I could not do that."

Singh argued with Adams, insisting that she label his baggage for the complete journey. A queue had formed behind him and passengers were getting irritated. Adams relented, saying: "Okay, I'll check it through but you have to check with Air-India in Toronto."

The passenger manifest would later confirm that Singh never boarded the flight. When it touched down at Toronto, luggage was transferred from Terminal One to the security area at Terminal Two where Air-India flight 182 was waiting.

Before loading it aboard the Boeing 747, the baggage was checked on a conveyor belt by two officers from Burns International, a private company employed by the airports authority to provide security. Just 15 minutes before the Air-India baggage began moving through the security room, the X-ray machine which scans the baggage broke down.

A senior security officer, John D' Souza, tried but failed to repair the machine and gave Jim Post, a Burns employee, a hand-held PD-4 explosives sniffer to check the baggage.

A British manufacturer of a similar device told *The Sunday Times* that a three-

day course is necessary to train people in the maintenance of devices such as the PD-4 and it takes a full day of training just to operate one. The machines are so sensitive that they can pick up one particle of explosive for every million parts of air.

The PD-4 works by detecting fumes from explosive devices, including bullets, dynamite and plastic explosives. D'Souza demonstrated the device to Post and another officer, Naseem Nanji, by holding a lighted match under the PD-4 and it sounded a high-pitched alarm.

"It would have gone crazy," said the expert consulted by *The Sunday Times*. "The exercise would have been pointless. The sound emitted when it detects only one millionth part of an explosive is a low ticking noise but it is still obviously an alarm."

Burns' officer Nanji recalls: "I heard the sniffer beep when it checked a bag. Jim Post was checking around the bag's zipper. He did a second check and it beeped again but it didn't make the long whistling sound like it had when John D'Souza demonstrated it to us."

Post told police that he had been told the sniffer would give off a loud piercing scream if it detected explosives. The suitcase was passed through and stored in the forward cargo compartment for the flight to Heathrow.

The reason the PD-4 gave off only a low pitched sound was that neither pressed on the bag to expel air for the equipment to analyse. Neither Post nor Nanji had had

any training in baggage security.

Post had worked for Burns International for eight months but had been rarely assigned to the airport. His only training had been eight films for "orientation" when he joined the company. "But I haven't had any training at the airport."

Nanji had worked for Burns for a year. Her work consisted of watching baggage conveyor belts to ensure no-one tampered with luggage after it had been cleared by security. She too, however, told detectives that she had little security training.

"I had been shown how to move the X-ray machine, how to plug it in and open the box on top to turn it on. I was shown how to pass baggage through the scanner to get a proper picture but I never attended any other training course to learn how to operate the scanner. The only courses I got from Burns was first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation."

The X-ray machine broke down while she was working it.

An internal report by the Canadian Department of Transport which regulates airport security and lays down training standards for security officers, concluded: "A significant number of the security guards who were on duty X-raying and testing for explosives when Air-India left Toronto did not meet the criteria in respect of completion of the training programme and annual refresher training."

Burns International said: "It is not our policy to comment on any matter of security."

After the Air-India disaster, the Canadian government took drastic steps at its airports to improve security.