

## Air Marshals pulled from key flights

By Brock N. Meeks, MSNBC

July 29, 2003, Despite renewed warnings about possible airline hijackings, the Transportation Security Administration has alerted federal air marshals that as of Friday they will no longer be covering cross-country or international flights, MSNBC.com has learned. The decision to drop coverage on flights that many experts consider to be at the highest risk of attack apparently stems from a policy decision to rework schedules so that air marshals don't have to incur the expense of staying overnight in hotels.

SEVERAL AIR marshals contacted by MSNBC.com Tuesday confirmed that they were alerted via text messages on their TSA-issued cell phones to check their schedules for changes.

"All overnights, starting from August first through the ninth, were canceled," an air marshal told MSNBC.com. "My [supervisor] told me overnights for all [field offices] were being canceled for an indefinite amount of time," said the air marshal, who requested anonymity. "The supervisors said they only had time to change schedules through the ninth."

Current flight schedules, which run through the end of July, Thursday, are staying intact, another air marshal told MSNBC.com.

Federal air marshals are armed undercover agents deployed on U.S. airlines and authorized to use deadly force to thwart a terrorist incident. Prior to Sept. 11, 2001, there were only a few dozen marshals who flew mainly on international flights. But after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks, Congress authorized a huge increase in air marshals. From a pool of 250,000 applicants, a few thousand -- the exact number is classified -- were hired and given special advanced anti-terrorist training.

Several marshals told MSNBC.com that the program is suffering budget troubles and that the agency is looking to make cuts wherever it can. Recently, enrollment in upgraded training for air marshals, known as "Phase II," was suspended.

The TSA declined to comment on the details behind this week's schedule change. "The agency cannot comment on details of federal air marshal mission operations," said Brian Turmail, a TSA spokesman. However, "TSA remains committed to aviation security and will take all appropriate steps necessary to respond to credible threat information," he said.

As to the allegation that budgetary constraints were at the root of the pullbacks, Turmail said that all programs within the TSA are "subject to ongoing review." In addition, "TSA's current task is to balance the need to meet changing threats with the need to live within the agency's budget," he said. "The federal air marshal budget is under review to determine how best to meet these two objectives."

The move to pull air marshals from any flight requiring them to stay overnight is particularly disturbing to some because it coincides with a new high-level hijacking threat issued by the Department of Homeland Security. That warning memo says that "at least one of these attacks could be executed by the end of the summer," according to a source familiar with the document.

The DHS memo also warns that new intelligence indicates that hijackers this time may simply try to crash the planes rather than fly them. "Hijackers may attempt to use common items carried by travelers such as cameras modified as weapons," and hijackers "may try to calm passengers" by making them believe they are only being taken hostage and "not on a suicide mission."

"Al-Qaida planners have primarily considered suicide hijackings and bombings as the most promising method to destroy aircraft in flight as well as to strike ground targets," the memo says. "Attack venues may include the United Kingdom, Italy, Australia or the East Coast of the United States due to the relatively high concentration of government, military and economic targets," the memo warns.

The cancellation of overnight stays has been floating around the air marshal rumor mill for weeks, based on conversations MSNBC.com has had with various sources in the air marshal program.

When the reality hit, several air marshals voiced their disbelief that the cutbacks were coming now, in the wake of newly issued warnings.

"The fact that this is coinciding with the new airline threats, it just blows our minds," an air marshal said. "We can't cover [every flight] but at least put us on the high-threat planes, the ones traveling across the country," the air marshal said, noting that the four planes hijacked on Sept. 11 were all scheduled cross-country flights and therefore filled to capacity with aviation fuel. Not having air marshal coverage on those types of flights, "it's just plain scary," the air marshal said.

The air marshal program has been beset by a number of problems during its quick ramp-up from a few agents to thousands. MSNBC.com reported in June that more than 100 federal air marshals had been fired or stripped of their flight status for problems stemming from their security clearance background investigations. In addition, some air marshals were flying without having received their final security clearances, Transportation Security Administration sources said.

MSNBC Terms, Conditions and Privacy ©2003