

Case 5

Nathaniel Heatwole, a sophomore at Guilford College, took seriously what he learned at the Quaker college. In the name of civil disobedience, the 20 year old willingly broke the law, admitted his guilt, and was willing to accept punishment, in order to bring public attention to inadequate implementation of a law

In September 2003, Heatwole planted box cutters, bleach, modeling clay, and matches on two domestic airliners. He immediately emailed the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), identifying himself and giving exact details about dates and flight numbers. The items were not discovered for five weeks and then during routine plane maintenance. Heatwole's misplaced email was eventually found in the TSA's information system. Heatwole's contention that security screening of passengers and planes is inadequate and that the TSA is inefficient and blundering seemed to have been supported.

As expected, Heatwole was arrested. True to the tenets of civil disobedience, he admitted his deeds, acknowledging that there would be penalties. A judge in April accepted Heatwole's guilty plea to a misdemeanor charge of violating security requirements at the Baltimore Airport. Heatwole initially faced one count of carrying a concealed dangerous weapon aboard an airliner, a felony that carries up to 10 years in prison. A plea deal for two years probation and 100 hours of community service was later established.

Maryland U.S. Attorney Thomas M. DiBiagio said, "The government believes that the appropriate resolution of this case is a guilty plea to a misdemeanor rather than a felony because of the defendant's extensive cooperation with federal authorities." DiBiagio stated that Heatwole's age, clean criminal record and "motivations for the misguided conduct" were factors in the government's decision to reduce the charge against him (The Sun News, April 24, 2004). Heatwole has met with FBI agents and TSA authorities to discuss airport security and he helped produce a videotape for training airport security trainers, according to the US Attorney's office.

The legal issues aside, many still question the ethics of such behavior. Was Heatwole gaming the system and being what TSA considers a "trouble maker"? Or was he justified in exercising a sense of ethics and social responsibility by pointing out flaws in the law?