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Nuclear security meltdown

By Claire Harvey
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FIVE months before two jets flew into the World Trade Centre in New York, the designers of the new nuclear reactor planned for Sydney's Lucas Heights were pondering a strange scenario.

What would happen if an aeroplane was flown at full speed into the reactor?

It was just a wild theory – but the safety report written in May 2001 declared the new reactor was so safe it could even withstand the impact of a light aircraft.

The designers, Argentine firm INVAP, included in their report a startling diagram showing a Cessna 500 jet flying into the fortified reactor.

At the same time, Greenpeace nuclear activists James Courtney and Steve Campbell were dreaming up a brash protest to show the world how vulnerable Lucas Heights would be to an attack.

They wanted to infiltrate the Lucas Heights facility and climb to the top of the reactor, just to prove how easy it would be for a terrorist to do the same.

They spent months planning the protest: scouting the facility, enacting role-plays in which protesters took the role of guards and training workers in climbing large structures.

The idea occurred to Courtney and Campbell on January 22 this year, as they stood in the dry suburban heat outside the reactor, trying to stop the exportation of a load of radioactive waste.

Security at Australia's only nuclear plant was almost non-existent – a couple of Australian Protective Service officers standing inside the gate.

Campbell and Courtney were intrigued: if security was this poor, what was to stop terrorists getting inside the facility itself?

The idea was to show that Lucas Heights' managing authority, the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation, was lying when it claimed its facility was secure and presented no danger to the people of Sydney's south.

"The people who are telling us that Lucas Heights is completely safe and secure are the same people who are telling us that Lucas Heights is essential for producing medical radioisotopes – when in fact there are much safer ways of producing them," Courtney says.

Planning for the protest was so secret that not even the other anti-Lucas Heights community groups saw it coming.

Staff and volunteers were flown in by Greenpeace from Brisbane, Adelaide, Melbourne and Perth.

The volunteers were simply told they were needed for an important protest. On Friday night last week, when they had all assembled in Sydney, they were informed of their mission and issued with cardboard barrel costumes marked "Uranium".

"The point of dressing up as barrels was to make sure we didn't look like terrorists," Courtney says.

"It's very important in this kind of direct action not to scare the security guards or the police into opening fire, so we wanted to look as innocuous as possible."

The job of the human barrels was to run around being as comical as possible to distract the guards and clear the way for three climb teams, each composed of eight recruits trained in climbing large structures.

The climbers would scale two of Lucas Heights' supposedly most secure buildings: the reactor itself and Building 27, where radioactive waste is stored. The third team was to climb another

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metal tower, used as a weather station, to unfurl banners and conduct telephone media interviews.

"We're all trained as industrial access technicians," Courtney says. "Some of the guys have worked as riggers and we could all get rigging jobs with our qualifications."

At 7pm on Sunday, Greenpeace media officer Carolin Wenzel rang trusted journalists at each of Sydney's three commercial TV stations, ABC radio, the wire service AAP, and one newspaper reporter, telling them to be ready at a shopping centre car park near Lucas Heights at 6.45am.

Before dawn on Monday, the climb teams assembled at a Greenpeace warehouse, drove to the suburban fringe and walked through the bush to Lucas Heights, waiting at the fence for orders.

"All teams proceed at your leisure," came the two-way radio message at 7.10am.

The human barrels arrived at the Lucas Heights gate in two Thrifty rental trucks, jumped out and tried to run into the site. The two Australian Protective Service guards on the gate, scrambling to round up the barrels and TV camera crews, didn't notice the climb teams scaling the 4m fence at the back of the establishment and climbing up the buildings.

The APS officers called 000 for help, but Greenpeace claims the extra police did not arrive until 45 minutes later – at 7.55am.

Detective Inspector Laurie Pettiford of Sutherland police says the time lag was more like 15 minutes.

"Police were on the scene very promptly. The call came out for cars which were on the road to go to the facility, and with the traffic at that time of the morning, that is simply how long it takes."

All protesters were arrested for trespassing.

Security was supposed to be beefed up at Lucas Heights after the air strikes on Afghanistan began in October, on instructions from the federal Government.

In November, ANSTO was ordered to conduct a review of security – including the likely impact of a large jet being flown into the reactor – by John Loy, head of the Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency, the watchdog that oversees Lucas Heights. The report is due out in mid-January.

But public tours of the facility continue and Courtney says Greenpeace cannot find any evidence of extra security at the site.

Nuclear scientist Jim Green, a researcher at Wollongong University, regularly enters Lucas Heights to use the library. "They issue you with a visitor's pass, but nobody ever checks the pass," Green says.

"When you go in on the bus, the security guards get on and ask everyone to wave their pass in the air but I'd just not bother and I have never been stopped."

Construction is due to begin on a new research reactor on the Lucas Heights site in April.

The INVAP report said terrorism was nothing to worry about because anyone who entered the facility would have to show identification.

"The facility has design provisions to deter attacks or sabotage," the report declared. "To access the facility, a person must go through several physical barriers and ID checks."

INVAP consulted experts in terrorism and explosive devices, who found "none of these attacks would threaten the integrity of the reactor core or create radioactive releases greater than those analysed from other . . . accidents."

But, with Bankstown Airport only 14km away and Sydney airport 22km to the northeast, the possibility of an aircraft crashing into the building had to be considered.

The federal Government's Environment Australia department had warned in a report dated February 1999 that: "An aircraft crash at the proposed reactor could have catastrophic consequences."

But the INVAP report said the reactor core was protected by "Aircraft Impact Steel Framed Grillage", a casing which could withstand the

blow of a Cessna 500 aircraft.

"The vertical component of an aircraft impact would be transferred to the foundations through the four corner columns," the report notes. "The loading will impart little if any additional stress to the reactor block."

Green says thousands of Sutherland Shire residents could suffer radiation doses if there was an accident or attack on the facility and the 800 Lucas Heights workers would certainly be seriously affected, suffering cancer and organ failure.

But ANSTO's website says that in any accident, the reactor would automatically close down and the reactor's steel casing would contain any radioactivity.

"No member of the public would be exposed to significant doses of radiation."

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