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Three baggage workers charged with theft from soldiers

By ERIC HARTLEY, Staff Writer

Three BWI Airport baggage handlers have been charged with stealing thousands of dollars worth of electronics from the luggage of soldiers heading to war in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Prosecutors charged two men last week; a third was arrested in January.

Maryland Transportation Authority Police detectives who investigated the case called it "a major felony theft scheme."

A prosecutor said about 45 soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines were victimized.

"It's absolutely appalling that anyone would steal from soldiers who are heading into harm's way," said Joe Davis, an Air Force veteran and spokesman for the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Mr. Davis said he'd never heard of a theft ring that targeted servicemembers' luggage.

For those fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, the comforts of home can be hard to come by. Many heading to war stuff their luggage with DVDs, music players and laptop computers in order to send e-mails home and entertain themselves in their off hours.

That makes their bags attractive targets.

The three men charged worked for a contractor at BWI Airport, which sees thousands of soldiers a month flying overseas or coming home.

Michael Harlee, 22, of Baltimore and Derek J. Murray, 20, of 8057 Windingwood Road in Glen Burnie were charged last week with felony theft.

The third man, 20-year-old Shaka N. Watson of Baltimore, is set to go to trial next month. His lawyer wasn't available for comment.





Police said more than 200 stolen items were seized from the three men's homes and from Mr. Watson's car.

Assistant State's Attorney Michael Dunty said there's no question the men knew whose belongings they were pilfering.

"Anyone who goes to the airport these days knows the military's going through," Mr. Dunty said. "You can tell they're military."

Police said the men stole laptop computers, digital cameras, video game systems and at least one MP3 player from November 2003 to November 2004.

MdTA police began investigating late last year after getting a call from the Air Force's Air Mobility Command, which coordinates flights taking soldiers overseas and bringing them home. More than 30 soldiers at that point had reported having things stolen from their checked bags.

The three men charged in the thefts worked for Signature Flight Support, a contractor for Air Mobility Command. Police said they also stole from baggage on Air Canada flights, since Signature Flight Support has a contract with that airline.

An official at Signature Flight Support said this morning the company wasn't likely to have any comment.

Detectives said they spoke to two men, not identified in court documents, who led them to Mr. Watson. He gave a confession during a Dec. 8 interview with detectives, court documents state.

"Watson indicated that he has stolen a large quantity of items from soldiers," a detective wrote.

Police said they had a tough time tracking down the victims since so many were on their way overseas. About 8,000 to 9,000 Defense Department passengers a month fly through BWI.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, even simple items like deodorant, soap and razor blades aren't always easy to get, people who are there say. So groups like the VFW and USO have gotten together thousands of care packages for servicemembers.

Army Sgt. Robert Adams, who is stationed near Kirkuk, Iraq, posted yesterday on a Web site called AnySoldier.com, which provides a way for people to donate creature comforts to military personnel.

"Any old DVDs or cheap ones that you can find are greatly appreciated as well as books and magazines," Sgt. Adams wrote. "We really are just trying to keep our sanity at this point in time."

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