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Pair paying for prank at Lincoln Tunnel

By SETH AUGENSTEIN

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Two Sussex County men commuted every day together through the Lincoln Tunnel. They carpoled on their way to their job in New York City. And as it was every day, traffic ground to a halt right at the entrance to the tunnel.

This one time, however, one of the duo reached out the window and glued on the concrete side of the tunnel at least one bottle decorated with a smiley face emblazoned on it. The two men later said they thought of it as a "spoof."

Tens of thousands of motorists thought differently. On Oct. 1, 2008, traffic through the tunnel was delayed and diverted for bumper-to-bumper rush-hour traffic as authorities responded to the bottles as if they were bombs. Several drivers said afterward they were stuck in more than three hours of traffic during the incident.

The Hudson County Prosecutor's Office was not amused by the "spoof," responding with an armed presence to both of the men's homes some weeks after the bottles had been affixed to the tunnel entrance. Both men were arrested and brought back to Hudson County. Prosecutors charged both Michael McCrimlisk, a 26-year-old from Hamburg, and Lawrence Fellipello, a 39-year-old from Vernon, with terroristic threats.

The men were responsible for two other such incidents Sept. 5 and Oct. 3, according to the prosecutor's office.

After more than a year of legal talks and court appearance, both Fellipello and McCrimlisk were sentenced Nov. 20, 2009. McCrimlisk received pre-trial intervention, a form of probation that allows first-time offenders to avoid actual prosecution, for a period between one and three years. Fellipello received one year of probation after pleading guilty to a disorderly charge. Both received stiff fines -- McCrimlisk must pay back \$15,000, and Fellipello's debt is \$10,000.

"They'll both be paying heavy restitution," said Kelly Simpson, a Hudson County assistant prosecutor.

Joseph Rem, McCrimlisk's attorney, said his client and his client's coworker were simply engaging in a "harmless little prank" that had been inspired by the cult magazine *Weird NJ*. He said the bottles had "been there for weeks" before anyone noticed them.

"It's much ado about nothing, as William Shakespeare might have said," Rem said. "It was even less than harmless."

However, authorities were serious about the perceived security threat, whether or not it was intended as a joke or as a decoration.

"What these men perpetrated was no laughing matter, and we're sending a clear message here by treating this seriously," said Samuel Plumeri Jr., the Port Authority's director of public safety and police superintendent, at the time of the incident.

Lee Clarke, an associate professor of sociology at Rutgers University and expert in the field of terrorism and its mass psychology, said the incident is an example of "elite panic" -- a phenomenon where the authorities are the first ones to get scared. A similar incident is the "Mooninite" scare in Boston three years ago, in which police panicked over the presence of LED cartoon characters placed in various parts of the city as part of a guerrilla marketing campaign.

"It seems like overreaction is the reasonable response," Clarke said.

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Rem said the Lincoln Tunnel response was part of a brave new world.

"We're living in a post-9/11, apocalyptic world," Rem said.

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