

World's biggest hacker held

By Rob Singh, Evening Standard
8 June 2005



A London man described as the "world's biggest computer hacker" has been arrested. Gary McKinnon, 39, was seized by the Met's extradition unit at his Wood Green home.

The unemployed former computer engineer is accused of causing the US government \$1 billion of damage by breaking into its most secure computers at the Pentagon and Nasa. He is likely to be extradited to America to face eight counts of computer crime in 14 states and could be jailed for 70 years.

The former Highgate Wood comprehensive-pupil was granted bail today at Bow Street Magistrates' Court.

Most of the alleged hacking took place in 2001 and 2002. At one stage the US thought it was the work of the al Qaeda terror network.

Friends said that he broke into the networks from his home computer to try to prove his theory that the US was covering up the existence of UFOs.

He is accused of a series of hacking offences including deleting "critical" files from military computers. The US authorities said the cost of tracking him down and correcting the alleged problems was more than £570,000. The offences could also see him fined up to £950,000 if found guilty on all charges.

He was arrested yesterday evening but the US first issued an indictment against him in November 2002.

Prosecutor Paul McNulty alleged that McKinnon, known online as "Solo," had perpetrated "the biggest hack of military computers ever". He was named as the chief suspect after a series of electronic break-ins occurred over 12 months at 92 separate US military and Nasa networks.

McKinnon was also accused of hacking into the networks of six private companies and organisations.

It is alleged that he used software available on the internet to scan tens of thousands of computers on US military networks from his home PC, looking for machines that might be exposed due to flaws in the Windows operating system.

Many of the computers he broke into were protected by easy-to-guess passwords, investigators said. In some cases, McKinnon allegedly shut down the computer systems he invaded.

The charge sheet alleges that he hacked into an army computer at Fort Myer, Virginia, where he obtained codes, information and commands before deleting about 1,300 user accounts.

Other systems he hacked into included the Pentagon's network and US army, navy and air force computers.

Reports when he was first indicted said that McKinnon found his career as a computer engineer tedious.

One message updating old school friends on a website read simply: "Computers (Yawn)".

Friends said he was desperate to prove that the Americans had mounted a huge cover-up to deny his belief that aliens had visited earth.

Andrew Edwards, who has known McKinnon since their days together at Highgate Wood comprehensive, said in 2002: "Gary told me all he was doing was looking for proof of a cover-up over UFOs.

"He's been interested in UFOs for some time and believes the Americans are holding back information - although he didn't find any proof."

Outside court, his solicitor Karen Todner said he was disappointed it had taken the authorities this long to bring him to court.

She said: "This decision for extradition is driven by the American government. Mr McKinnon intends to contest this case most vigorously.

"Of particular concern to him is the treatment of other British nationals under the American judicial system which inspires little confidence.

"We believe that as a British national, he should be tried here in our courts by a British jury and not in the US."

UFODATA

If I were in Gary's position I wouldn't be too worried, he will probably be offered a job.....

© www.thisislondon.co.uk

Buy tonight's ~~Evening Standard~~ for the latest news, sport and entertainment