



Know the Smells and Warning Bells of WMD

During the lion's share of my career, it was assumed that any incident involving explosives or weapons of mass destruction was a law enforcement incident until proved otherwise. Overall responsibility during the crisis phase would be assigned to law enforcement. Fire, EMS and technical-rescue resources obviously would be involved in some support role during the consequence management phase.

In actuality, the potential for fire departments to be called first, respond first and arrive first is pretty high. Early integration and coordination of strategic objectives and tactical priorities are essential for a successful outcome. In teaching advanced fire behavior to officer recruits, many fire instructors have personified the fire as a moving, thinking enemy. The characteristics of a dragon were cleverly described by Robert DeNiro in *Backdraft* as he shared professional knowledge with a rookie fire investigator. In the same vein, 21st-century fire officers need to understand the mindset of the terrorists.

We must begin to think like the enemy and learn their tools and tricks. We must second-guess our routines that may not provide safety and security in the new threat environment, with the potential for secondary devices and collapses constantly on our minds. We must learn to preplan for the likely terrorist targets in our response districts. We must learn to operate under a unified command organization. We can't just stage and let the cops do their thing — it belongs to all of us now.

A terrorism awareness outline for responding fire officers looks like this: terrorism definition,

target identification, methods and means, effects and limitations of WMD, unified command concept, agency involvement, jurisdiction authority, and agency functions.

Terrorism is the threat or the use of force against non-combatants and civilians to effect social or political change. It's not specifically designed to kill the target but to illicit fear, paralysis, and public and political reaction.

When looking at and identifying local targets, political and community symbols that represent freedom, capitalism or government authority should rise to the top of your list. Let's look at the Sept. 11 targets: the Pentagon, symbol of America's military power; the World Trade Center, symbol of America's wealth and financial control; the White House, symbol of America's democracy and freedom. All government buildings are targets, as well as all public memorials and historic symbols.

The next set of targets are those places where crowds assemble daily. Sports stadiums,

mass transit vehicles, houses of worship, amusement parks, concert halls and shopping malls are all high-value targets.

The acronym B-NICE has been used as a memory aid for the primary causative agents involved in a WMD event: biological, nuclear, incendiary, chemical and explosive. We already are quite familiar with incendiary and explosive devices. We know their signatures and their effects. When narrowing down biological, chemical and nuclear agents, there are a few new questions that should be asked by the initial arriving units to start a size-up. This assessment also ensures that all participants know that a WMD event has been confirmed.

Was there an explosion? Was it large or small? If there was a large explosion with significant damage, think "E," explosives. Remember to prepare for the biggest explosion possible from a secondary device and the first is only to get you to commit to the scene, as was the case at the World Trade Center.

Large conventional explosions usually rule out the use of a chemical or biological attack because large explosives can alter chemicals in the chemical weapons or destroy biological agents. Usually, the explosives used to disseminate these items are small. A large conventional explosive also may have been used to disperse nuclear or radiological material in an improvised radioactive device or a radiological dispersal device. If there was a small explosion, this may be more consistent with biological or chemical dispersal.

The standard hazmat universal protective actions apply here. Approach from uphill and upwind and isolate access into

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TRAINING PERSPECTIVES

and out of the area. See if you can get any information from witnesses, other bystanders or reporting parties through the dispatcher. Support self-triage and self-evacuation to a holding area without exposing yourself by contact with survivors. The siren public address system or a bullhorn are essential equipment.

Was there a smell of garlic? A garlic smell is associated with both mustard gas and lewisite. If there was a garlic scent and the immediate observed signs and reported symptoms are of eye and skin pain and reddening, consider lewisite. If there was a smell of garlic after a small explosion but no immediate signs and symptoms, consider mustard gas.

If there was a small explosion but no garlic smell, the observable signs and reported symptoms can narrow down the agent used. If the victims are displaying seizures and an apparent loss of consciousness, consider a nerve agent. If they are having difficulty breathing with increased gasping, respiratory rate and depth, a blood agent is your best bet. The blood agents interfere with the oxygen-carrying capacity of the blood, so the body's reaction is to increase respirations. If the observable symptoms are coughing and choking, consider a choking agent as the cause.

These are quick rules of thumb for initial assessment. Additional monitoring must be conducted and evidence of the specific agents used should be collected by a trained and equipped evidence response or hazmat team.

This may be a lot of information to try to relay to your officers. Fortunately, protective actions will be the same for most of these attack situations. Protective measures are based on three activities that provide safety: time, distance and shielding.

We want to reduce the time that victims and responders are exposed to any potentially dangerous materials. When we isolate and deny entry, we are preventing people from spending time in proximity to the agents. The quicker we isolate and start gross-decontaminating the exposed, the less time the agent has to cause harm. The less time entry teams spend in the hot zone, the less risk to all personnel.

In setting up hot, warm, cold and collapse zones, distances from incident facilities and operating units must be positioned outside of specific zones used to control the scene. First-responding firefighters should be able to set up a hot zone a minimum 300 feet from the warm zone. Don't forget uphill and upwind considerations.

The next decision is based on what the material is. If there are conventional explosives present and they are involved in fire, we are going to need a lot more distance than if it is a 55-gallon or smaller container dispersing a vapor. Evacuation distances must be based on worst-case scenarios using the Field Expedient Guide or the DOT North American Emergency Response Guidebook.

The other critical issue concerning dis-

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tance is positioning of the command post, incident base, communications unit and personnel rehab activities. Reconnaissance teams should be deployed to assess the possibility of secondary devices and collapses and ensure that incident facilities and support zones are safe.

Shielding can include anything that limits exposure to a potentially harmful agent, such as chemical-protective clothing, SCBA, air-purifying respirators, vehicles, buildings and other containment systems. Check your own operating procedures.

We all have seen the after-action reports that showed major incidents in which the law enforcement agency set up its command organization, the fire department set up its operations center and EMS was left out of the loop because it was a third service or a private provider. Homeland Security Presidential Directive 5 states that all agencies responding to a terrorist event will use the National Incident Management System and contribute to a single, coordinated, unified command system consisting of police, fire and public health departments; FBI; EMS providers; and other representatives.

The operations section will have a section chief and a deputy section chief from the FBI and multiple disciplines operating under the same incident action plan, under the objectives for the entire operational period. The coordinated tactics will be accomplished through the assignment and execution of multiple tasks being performed by multiple players from multiple agencies and jurisdictions.

So how can we better prepare our troops? Agency executives need to bury the hatchet and extend the olive branch to their counterparts from law enforcement, EMS and public health and works. If you are a chief officer and don't know your local/regional FBI special agent in charge and WMD specialist, you're behind the curve. Make that call today.

Set up two drills this year. The first should be a simple tabletop including all agencies and players who will contribute to the unified command. Even if you limit the involvement to those in command, planning and operations, it will be a huge step forward. You could extend it to all those assigned to the command staff (safety, information and liaison) and general staff (finance, administration and logis-

tics) of an event involving WMD, if you want to make it big.

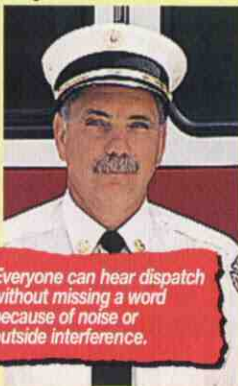
The second drill can be a simulation involving field and command personnel from local police, fire and EMS agencies. The level of preparedness that will result from these simple steps may surprise you. For an in-depth look at fire department response to terrorist events,

check out the latest American Heat at www.fetn.com. **[FC]**

John Linstrom is the education consultant for FETN. He served more than 20 years in fire departments in California and Texas before retiring with the rank of assistant chief. Linstrom is a National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officer graduate and adjunct instructor. In addition, he's a member of the Federal Mass-Fatalities Recovery Team and California Task Force 6.

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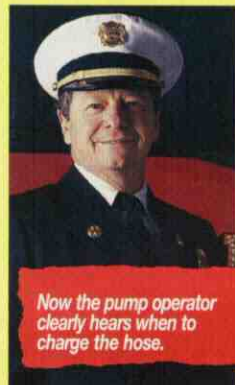


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