

Charleston Gazette Friday, February 15, 2002:



mannequin



tunnel

Just like Ground Zero

Mine Rescue Team practices for emergencies in Turnpike's former Memorial Tunnel

Friday February 15, 2002

By Rick Steelhammer
STAFF WRITER

Beams from hardhat-mounted lights crisscrossed in the smoke, drifting up from a floor strewn with twisted steel rebar, sheet metal, huge chunks of cement, and an overturned car in which a blood-smeared body was pinned.

"We've got another dead body," said one of the men under the headlamps. "It's a male."

After radioing the news to a command post, the men pushed deeper into the dark underground disaster area looking for survivors, or failing that, more bodies.

"Over here! Why aren't you coming?" a female voice called from the deep recesses of the darkness a few moments later.

"Hey! Hey! Where you at?" the men shouted back, shuffling toward the sound through smashed cars, fallen beams and ruptured cooling equipment.

Thursday was another day of underground training for members of the West Virginia Mine Rescue Team, comprised of employees of the state Office of Miners' Health, Safety and Training.

But this training was unique: Instead of drilling on a disaster simulation involving coal mines and miners, Thursday's scenario involved the collapse of a 22-story building and an attempt to rescue suspected survivors from an underground parking garage into which possibly hazardous coolant was leaking.

"Mine rescue teams already know a lot about things like roof support and ventilation," said Davitt McAteer, the former head of the Mine Safety and Health Administration and now a consultant for the International Union of Operating Engineers.

"Their structural awareness and their familiarity with command and control procedures could enhance homeland security," he said. "They could be a real asset in responding to other emergencies, like the World Trade Center collapse."

Thursday's drill at the Center for National Response's Memorial Tunnel complex beside the West Virginia Turnpike was a pilot project that could lead to more involvement by mine rescue personnel in response to non-mining emergencies. McAteer said officials in the federal departments of Defense and Energy are being briefed on the possibilities.

McAteer has been involved with an effort by the Operating Engineers to train Ground Zero cleanup workers in respiratory safety and hazardous materials awareness.

"The more you learn about what happened there after Sept. 11, the more you see how recovery could be improved," he said. "From the start, there were thousands of volunteers wanting to help, but there was no command and control. When I got there three weeks after the attack, it was still very chaotic."

On Wednesday, the West Virginia Mine Rescue Team trained at Beckley through the Operating Engineers' National Hazardous Materials Training Project.

During their drill in the half-mile-deep Memorial Tunnel, team members entered the "underground garage" area by climbing through a pitch-black, smoke-filled, multilevel 50-yard maze which contained numerous dead ends and crawlspaces as narrow as 18 inches.

"We were in our rubber decontamination suits for the first time," said rescue team member Milton Smallwood. "With the re-breathers and our other gear, we got hot fast. It was one of the toughest exercises we've done in quite a while."

Once inside the simulated underground parking garage, team members searched for seven 185-pound mannequins representing corpses, and two green-tagged mannequins representing survivors.

Along the way, they had to check the air for possible contamination and diagnose the substance leaking from a ruptured air conditioning unit.

Strong resemblance to World Trade Center

Among those watching the exercise was Greg Gittrich, a reporter for the New York Daily News, who has covered his newspaper's Ground Zero beat since Sept. 11.

Gittrich said the Memorial Tunnel parking garage simulation bore a strong resemblance to the four-level parking complex under the World Trade Center.

"It's pretty eerie being here," he said. "The dust is thicker at the World Trade Center garage, but otherwise, this looks a lot like it."

Gittrich visits the Ground Zero recovery area several times a week these days, but was there on a daily basis soon after the attacks.

The Daily News reporter was driving along the Brooklyn side of the East River en route to his Manhattan office on the morning of Sept. 11, when he saw the terrorist-commandeered aircraft plow into the center's twin towers.

"I stopped and tried to call my editor on my cell phone, but it was dead - its tower was on top of the Trade Center," he recalled.

He parked his car and took a subway to the base of the center, where he emerged to the confusion of its evacuation.

"I realized I'd lost my pen, so I went a block north to borrow one," he recalled. That move could have saved his life because the tower nearest him began to collapse. Gittrich knew the situation was serious when he saw an FBI agent he recognized running as fast as he could to get away from the building.

Gittrich managed to reach safety with no injuries - just a thick coating of white dust. He remained at Ground Zero for three days before returning to his office and going home. He has covered the recovery effort ever since.

Sound system to increase realism

The simulated collapsed underground structure in the Memorial Tunnel will soon be even more realistic. A sound system is being installed to produce such sounds as creaking beams, cracking cement and hissing steam pipes.

The Memorial Tunnel complex is one component of a plan drafted by state Adj. Gen. Allen Tackett and endorsed by Sen. Robert C. Byrd Jr., D-W.Va., to make West Virginia the nation's homeland security training center.

The tunnel closed to traffic in 1987, when a four-lane upgrade of the West Virginia Turnpike rendered it obsolete.

From 1990 to 1997, the Massachusetts Department of Transportation used the tunnel to conduct smoke, fire and ventilation testing. Research performed during that period played a role in designing the Chunnel, which carries traffic under the English Channel between England and France, and the Big Dig, Boston's new Central Artery project.

The Memorial Tunnel also contains a highway tunnel section, complete with a New York Transit Authority bus, firetrucks, tractor-trailers, an assortment of cars and motorcycles, and a subway station, which includes subway cars from Boston's Green Line and a depot area equipped with vending machines, movie posters, benches and turnstiles.

Military groups, firefighters, police, drug enforcement agents and first responders from across the nation have trained at the facility, which was purchased with a \$3 million grant secured by Byrd.

To contact staff writer Rick Steelhammer, use e-mail or call 348-5169. Write a letter to the editor.

New York Daily News, February 17, 2002:

Where They Learn To Fight Terror Experts train in W. Va. for crises in subways

By GREG GITTRICH
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half-mile inside a West Virginia mountain, in a mining town with no mass transit, the Defense Department is preparing for a deadly terrorist attack on New York City's subway system.

Along a dirt road that leads to an abandoned highway tunnel, the only hint that something out of the ordinary is going on is a string of parked trucks with government license plates.

Behind thick layers of Appalachian rock, rescuers in lime-green hazardous materials suits are crawling through narrow voids in an avalanche of concrete and steel.



Maisel NEWS

Rescuers try to remove mock victims from the wreckage of a collapsed medical facility.

The six men are at the far end of a mock subway station, complete with 800 feet of track and two subway cars. They are desperate to reach bloody, human figures trapped under debris ahead. But they move deliberately through the dense smoke, mapping their maze-like route and continuously checking hazardous gas gauges hanging from their belts.

Gray ash — terrifyingly similar to the thick dust that choked lower Manhattan after the World Trade Center collapsed — blankets crushed cars.

"I'm over here. Help me!" a woman cries. But the rescuers' oxygen is running short. They have to turn back.

"We think like terrorists when we create these drills," said retired 20-year Marine veteran Doug Davis. He has special training in responding to chemical and biological attacks, and now works for Research Planning Inc. — a Virginia-based war games company that devises anti-terrorism boot camps for the Defense Department.

"The people who come here already are trained," said Davis, giving a rare tour of the compound last week to the Daily News. "We put that training into action."

Preparing for Worst

Hidden inside Memorial Tunnel, the Center for National Response allows emergency response teams to practice combatting and cordoning off underground areas attacked by terrorists.

Gadgets, machinery and specialized vehicles — including a citybus and a fire truck — and tons of rubble stand ready for use in a variety of disaster scenarios.

Along with collapsed subway and bombed-out parking garage drills, there are scenarios involving chemical and biological weapons, a hijacked bus, radioactive leaks and a 20-car pileup caused by the intentional crashing of a hazardous materials truck.

New York City has been actively preparing for the worst in its subway system since the 1993 World Trade Center attack. And the Office of Emergency Management publicly stepped up the anti-terrorism drills after a Japanese doomsday cult spread lethal nerve gas in a Tokyo subway in 1995.

No New York City police or firefighters have trained at the Center for National Response since it opened in December 2000. But the war games gauntlet has been run by almost every emergency and law enforcement agency that would help the city respond to an attack: the FBI, the Marines, the Army and the National Guard's Weapons of Mass



Maisel NEWS

The training exercises can prove exhausting for the rescue team.

Destruction Civil Response Teams, as well as numerous search-and-rescue and canine teams.

Office of Emergency Management Director Richard Sheirer told The News the city is considering sending personnel to the facility "to make sure that New York remains the most prepared city in the nation."

The Sept. 11 attacks demonstrated that police, firefighters and federal agencies need help beyond their ranks.



Maisel NEWS

Mock transportation stations play an important role in the Defense Department training.

Soon after the towers fell, hundreds of ironworkers, heavy machine operators, contractors and carpenters rushed to Ground Zero. They continue to work today, clearing debris and recovering bodies.

"We have to be ready and organized," said Don Carson, director of the West Virginia-based Operating Engineers National Hazmat Program, which oversees worker safety at Ground Zero.

"You can't save anyone if you don't have somebody who knows how to lift up the collapsed steel and rubble in a hazardous area," Carson said. "We need to take the lessons that were learned from the World Trade Center and prepare."

Carson's hazardous materials experts, the Defense Department and the Energy Department are cross-training heavy machine operators and mine rescue teams so they'll be prepared to assist after bombings, or chemical or biological attacks.

The hope is that the pilot program will be a model for how to train civil rescue and recovery teams on coordinating with law enforcement during a crisis.

Eerily Realistic

The mine rescuers in West Virginia took part in the cross-training last week. After days of classroom work, they were put through an anti-terrorism course that combined collapsed subway and parking garage scenarios with an unknown hazardous gas leak.

The most difficult aspect of the drill was a multi-level maze of small wooden rooms and shafts. The teams had to crawl about 50 yards through a claustrophobic "egress trainer," lugging oxygen tanks on their backs and clearing rubble as rats scurried by in the smoky darkness.

The objective was to identify the gas leak, communicate to a central command post and rescue an unknown number of bloodied, 185-pound mannequins trapped under mangled cars and concrete on the other side.

One team was forced to turn back as its oxygen ran low. The other group followed the path marked by the first team and was able to rescue three mannequins before exhausting its air supply.

"One of our guys probably would have died in a real situation," said rescuer Bill Tucker, 43. "We went from rescue mode to survival mode real quick because we were low on oxygen."

With \$16.5 million in federal defense funding, the West Virginia tunnel will train about 1,500 military and civilian personnel this year. A larger facility, the National Training Center for Homeland Security, is being planned for the Army National Guard's Camp Dawson in the Appalachian mountains near the West Virginia border with Pennsylvania.

The National Guard center would include an urban combat range; a mock airport with two landing strips, a control tower and a terminal building; a course to practice evasive vehicle maneuvers and pursuit tactics; and a warehouse for hazardous materials training.

"We have to be prepared for terrorist attacks," said Wayne Ashby, captain of a mine rescue team that was cross-training. "After the World Trade Center, it is pretty obvious it could happen again. We can never have too many people ready."

Original Publication Date: 02/17/2002