

Times Have Changed

by
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After a recent call out several of our team members started reflecting on how drastically times have change in the Hazardous Devices arena. For me it only seems like yesterday that my “mentors” asked me if I would be interested in becoming a “bomb technician.” Of course being a little naïve I responded yes and the challenge was on.

This was 1985 in Tallahassee, Florida and even though it is the state capital, it still had a small town atmosphere. There were three other active techs in the area at the time that took me under their wings and started showing me the ropes. Boy did they have me doing things that the new guys today would not believe. I recall several terrible headaches from certain techs, who have since retired but one who is still active in IABTI, having me unroll nitro based dynamite for some dog and pony shows. Funny, they forgot to tell me to wear gloves! These guys were the true pioneers in this area and operated under a mutual aid agreement long before that was the norm. Between the two agencies they worked for there was an old fluoroscope, one bomb blanket, a coffee can of string with a 1/0 treble hook, a crude electronic stethoscope and a bomb trailer built by a local welder. Other than basic hand tools - that was it. Of course once I was on board, they referred to me as their robot.

In those days when we received a call out the bosses would only want to know if it was going to cost the agency any money and for us not to get hurt. Often times we couldn't even get uniformed personnel to assist with perimeters. I know everyone has war stories but it seemed ours often resulted in borrowing trucks from County Road Maintenance to pull the homemade bomb trailer which often resulted in a tow truck being called to pull it. Or better yet, pulling up to a scene and having to tell the Fire Department that our truck was not on fire and if it was, just wait until the flames reached the back before putting it out.

*“If a PIO even showed up
it was because we were
on their way home.”*

Back then, as many of you know, you had to be creative in obtaining equipment and supplies. I recall one incident in which the Honorable Joe Doyle finally convinced the Sheriff we needed a response vehicle. The result was a surplus prisoner transport van which was a six cylinder with a three speed manual transmission. I think of the calls running lights and siren and

having most of the traffic passing us as it would not run faster than about 35 mph pulling the trailer. Joe Doyle, Jim Frassrand and Pete Ferris were true pioneers in the field in our area back in those times.

In about 1989 we finally convinced our bosses of the need to purchase a robot, x-ray system and a bomb suit. This was close to \$45,000 dollars and you would have thought it was going to bankrupt the State. As I recall the robot, built overseas, didn't work too well after about a year. I learned through the network of techs that John Murray, Metro Dade, had a couple of the same platforms so I called him to seek advice. For those of you that have dealt with John - he could be direct and to the point. When I explained what I had he quickly told me of a solution to the problem. “Tie a rope to it and use it for a boat anchor!” I didn't quite go that far but you can bet that was not the answer the bosses wanted to hear.

As the years slowly ticked by it was still difficult to obtain funding to even purchase explosives, Joe Doyle would often call me and let me know he had been given access to whatever explosives someone had given him. Joe even “obtained” a couple of small bunkers to store explosives in. The local law enforcement academy gave us a small area to utilize as a disposal area/training area which over several years we begged, borrowed or acquired materials to build a disposal bunker out of railroad crossties, a dumpster to burn fireworks in and even installed underground firing lines. We thought we were first class at that point. But the ironic thing is that nobody wanted to know what we were doing other than when we would blow somebody's knickknacks off of the fireplace mantle. If a PIO even showed up it was because we were on their way home.

Of course then that terrible day occurred when international terrorism truly hit us; September 11, 2001. Everyone knows what has happened since then. We have funding for equipment that we never would have dreamed possible five years prior to that terrible tragedy. Of course now we have the most up to date equipment and response vehicles and the numbers of techs in this area have tripled. Issues such as full time techs - which was unthinkable ten years ago - are now the accepted norm and regularly scheduled training as a regional response team occurs at least twice a month. Of course with all of this comes that fact now if a call out occurs, every supervisor up the chain has to be notified, the PIO, the county Emergency Operations Center, the State Emergency Operations Center, ATF, FBI, DHS and TSA. Recently we obtained a new Response Vehicle that even has a flat screen monitor mounted on the exterior because so many of the bosses wanted to watch over the robot operator's shoulder we couldn't get other equipment out.

Yes, times have changed and now as my partner, Jimmy Moon (attended HDS Basic way back in 1973-74), nears his retirement date and I come into my final three years, I watch a whole new breed coming into play. They will have challenges that those past have never dreamed of. We can only hope the best for them and leave this profession knowing we did make a difference. 🍷