



Facing the Unknown

by Gordon Hunter

There is no such thing as a guarantee in the EOD business, but most of us would agree that, faced with a suspicious package or blatant IED, we have a pretty good idea of how to proceed. But what about the times the “known unknown” is a bit more...well, unknown? Given the omnipresent threat of WMDs and similar attacks, who can squads turn to for help?

Fire departments do their utmost to stay on top of the hazardous materials realm, but for most departments, this is an additional duty and few field full-time HazMat units. Numerous federal entities field HazMat trained teams, but often they are at the bottom of the local-county-state-federal response chain. The military can assist, but given current operations tempo, there is no guarantee that the specialized CBRNE troops will be available. There is, however, an entity assigned to every state and in the US; the National Guard Civil Support Team.

The Civil Support Teams, or CSTs, are comprised of Army and Air National Guard troops, twenty-two personnel total with an average 80/20 Army/Air split. There is one team in every state and territory with two in NY, CA and FL. Unlike “traditional” guardsmen, CST members are Active Guard and Reserve (AGR) personnel and thus, on duty 24/7 just like active duty troops. The twenty-two personnel cover eighteen military specialties and are all trained and certified as HazMat Technicians through NFPA and IFSAC certification. Teams are chartered by Congress to “Identify, advise, assess and assist” in support of local incident commanders (ICs) on known or suspect WMD incidents, manmade and natural disasters and other missions as required. Teams bring a wealth of knowledge and equipment to support the IC at no charge to the requesting agency. Each team belongs to the governor of the state and is prohibited by law from deploying overseas. This means every state always has

a team on station.

CSTs are unique in their use of both military “green gear” and commercial-off-the-shelf equipment, ensuring the widest range and highest efficiency of detection and sampling capability. Team members operate in a manner compliant with both military regulation and civilian (OSHA, NFPA, etc) guidance and are fully NIMS-compliant, generally plugging into the operations branch as a specialized strike team or group. Teams are fully self-contained and self-supporting with internal logistics, command, decontamination and operations support. They deploy within 90 minutes of recall using organic ground vehicles and/or airlift as required. Teams can deploy in uniform or civilian clothes as requested by the IC, and vehicles are unmarked GSA fleet equipped for emergency response (lights, sirens, etc). CSTs have operated throughout the range of public safety incidents: covert monitoring at major

events such as the Democratic National Convention and NASCAR races, providing the only communications support to hurricane-ravaged areas during Katrina, Gustav and Ike, monitoring sulfur emissions from volcanoes and responding to uncountable numbers of “white powder” and “suspicious package” calls.

All the background is great, but what do these teams really bring to the IC, and to bomb squads in particular? A CST arrives on scene with a great deal of equipment, but the two pieces that set the team apart are the Analytical Laboratory System (ALS) and the Unified Command Suite (UCS) vehicles. The ALS is a top quality analysis platform on wheels, featuring a full range of hazard identification systems from Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR – biological detection) to Fourier Transform Infrared (FTIR – multiple uses), laboratory grade Gas Chromatograph/Mass Spectrometer (GCMS – chemical analysis) to a Level III bio-hazard glove box. This robust platform is staffed by one scientist and one laboratory technician and can be employed within approximately twenty-five minutes of arrival, giving the IC or squad commander a presumptive identification of what the suspicious material is (or, more importantly in most cases, what it ISN'T.) At present, the CST ALS program is undergoing ISO

certification for LRN membership and national recognition as a gold-standard lab, with all procedures conducted in accordance with LRN standards. The UCS is a full-range communications platform, able to interface with most any communication system known. It can multiplex different responder radios, enhance on-scene communications, offers full telephone, FAX, radio video teleconference, and internet (secure and non-secure) support, and can

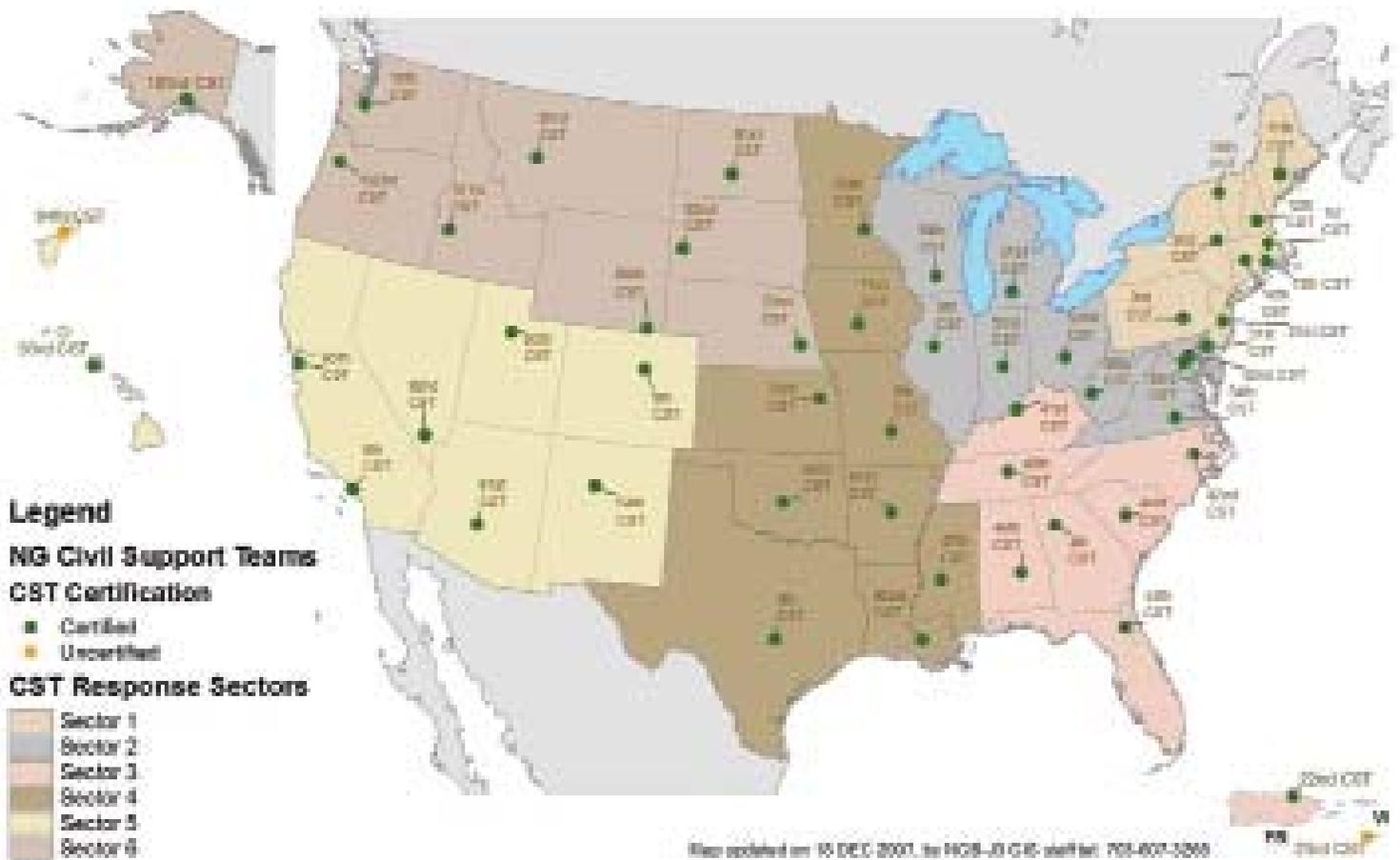


reach surface-to-ship and surface-to-air. It is manned by one Information Technology specialist and one radio technician and can be operational within 10 minutes of arrival. Both platforms feature generators which enable them to be standalone without power support and, in fact, provide shore power to other assets.

CSTs are fully capable of joint entry with bomb squads and are

trained in evidence preservation and collection protocols, ensuring crime scene preservation. Survey personnel conduct site characterization, reconnaissance and sampling missions, are trained in confined space operations, and bring self-extraction capability to provide rescue as needed. Team decontamination operations are suited to team members and partner agencies, but are not configured for mass casualty decon. Most teams, however, are capable of processing responders through the full technical decon, to include personnel in bomb suits. Teams also maintain a medical contingent, able to provide pre- and post-entry medical support, hazard analysis and prophylaxis recommendations, treatment advice and medical threat/hazard data. In addition to all the above, CST personnel are trained in hazard modeling, providing the IC with a pictorial representation of the threat in order to make critical decisions about sheltering, evacuation and hazard progression.

So, there are obvious reasons to call a CST when responding, but what about the rest of the time? CSTs spend most of their non-mission time much as bomb techs do – training and teaching. Team members conduct outreach with all manner of local, state and federal agencies, training responders on cutting edge technology, conducting joint entry exercises, small-scale laboratory classes, CBRNE



education, and advising on protective measures and response techniques to enhance life safety. Teams also conduct stand-by missions at major events ranging from National Security Special Events (NSSE) to large-crowd venues like the World Series and, providing low-profile, real-time hazard assessment for event officials. Teams are required to recertify through external evaluation every eighteen months in order to be response capable as well as maintain state and federal requirements for maintenance of specialist certifications (HazMat, etc).

Bottom line – when a bomb in not just a bomb, or something just doesn’t seem right (Hmmm...why would someone need chicken eggs and a glove box in a homemade TATP lab?) the CST in your state is on call and ready to assist. CST personnel, in general, are not bomb technicians and will not conduct RSPs

or muscle in on bomb “turf” although a few CST members are military EOD technicians and bring that experience to the table as well. They will, however, provide a full spectrum of CBRN knowledge, detection, and analysis as well as mitigation advice, support in integrating other response agencies, and technical reachback support to the requesting IC at no cost.

While team contact procedures may vary slightly state to state, in general a CST can be activated through the State Office of Emergency Management and/or the National Guard Joint Operations Center. Many teams are also willing to “self-activate” and prefer a direct call from the IC. All maintain a 24/7 duty officer to take calls.

In today’s world of myriad threats, combined operations with other agencies just make sense – enhancing the ca-

pabilities of all personnel involved with the ultimate goals of life and public safety. If you’ve never met your CST, give them a call and see what you can offer each other – it will be well worth your time.

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