

Explosives Storage after Retirement

By Joseph M. Dempsey

I'll open this by saying this is just my opinion. I elected to pass on the wisdom of my 25+ years as a civilian bomb technician and investigator regarding incidents that will get you into trouble, or at least make you one of the infamous where you live. Having any type of explosive, explosive precursor, bomb component, or military ordnance on your property after you give up your career is only asking for trouble.

Just before I retired I was called to the residence of an old friend. He had passed away three years before our squad made the response. His wife was cleaning out his storage shed and garage and had located a collection of military and civilian explosive items. There were Military Smoke Grenades and Grenade simulators from the Viet Nam era. There were non-electric fuse blasting caps (copper) amidst this collection. We called Ft. Carson and had the Army EOD respond to collect the military items. On their arrival the senior technician looking at the rather large collection, and noting the residential neighborhood this collection was stored in asked if we were filing charges. I explained that the person responsible was deceased, and I realized that if my old friend were alive I would have to file criminal charges on him.

Was he wrong? By current rules, absolutely. He was probably wrong back when he placed the items in his home, or work place. This was back when some "bent the rules," and they were in different times.

When most of the civilian squads were started in the late 1960's and early 1970's there was nothing like we have today. Tools were the invention of the mechanically inclined. Good tools and ideas were passed on from squad to squad by means of the HDS School, the FBI bulletin, or the IABTI training. In some cases explosive storage was wherever the squad could put it.

Why were squads operating in this mode? No budget for equipment, training, or the explosives that were needed to function. Literally, the gear your team had is what was carried in the responder's vehicle. Some equipment was made by the local High School Shop class. Some smaller agencies that had an explosive magazine for storage, usually had it hidden someplace on their agency property. Explosives that some teams used were confiscated from illegal activities or donated by the military (until MOVE) or other squads. One area obtained a large amount of military C-4 when a Federal Judge turned it over to them as a result of a sting operation.

So, was it wrong the way things were done? For those

who had to operate in this method, the answer would be no (at that time). Today they would be judged harshly. On two occasions within the last two years I learned through the press and from e-mails that two former associates were being investigated for possession of explosives, or explosive components/chemicals at their residences. Were they right or wrong? Those cases are not what I'm writing about. When all is said and done we will hear the outcome I'm sure. What I'm concerned about is the fallout for our profession. What is the opinion of their peers, the public, congress and the media? That is what I'm discussing (2008 vs. 1971); the rules we must live by today. Are we any different than the commercial user or the military? Are we not facing Congressional oversight regarding our storage? Have we not had national attention placed on civilian law enforcement because at least three explosive magazine burglaries have occurred over the past several years?

Among the older group, are the people who started this career path and there are those who understand the reasoning behind using storage where space is available. I won't say that all of this group agrees with that reasoning; I know I don't. Among newer bomb technicians there is no reason for what occurred. My opinion in this age of terrorism, increased information on the internet as well as prosecutors' stance is **why take the chance?** You are placing yourself into the position facing a potential arrest, and the potential future lawsuit. Maybe you are thinking nobody knows about your stash? Not right now, but what if your house is burglarized, or there is a fire? Your neighbors are not going to understand why you had these items in your garage. The members who replaced you are going to be embarrassed at having to respond to your home to collect the same items that you arrested people for possessing during your career. How will you feel if your peers/former associates have to arrest you or search your home?

Finally how will you feel if the collection of explosive parts makes the news? Your friends and family will be embarrassed for you. You will be embarrassed. Hey even if the charges are lowered or dropped, the fact that you were arrested is what is remembered. Only half of those made

aware of your arrest here about the un-arrest.

If you elect to go into a side business after you leave government employment, get the proper permits and insurance to continue to use/manufacture explosives. You have to possess the proper permits even if you are training with the “Old squad,” as you are not covered by their insurance. In fact your own homeowners insurance probably won’t pay the freight if you are injured making or using explosives without a proper permit. Let’s look at the worst case scenario, you are present and decide to help out, “Murphy” appears and injuries or damage occurs. I believe you are in the chain of liability. New Kid’s if the old guy comes back and is teaching class, does he/she have the permit and proper insurance to cover accidents? We live in a law-suit happy environment and you must cover your posterior.

Let me refer back to my old friend’s home. At the end of the day his wife asked me if the items recovered were dangerous to her and her children, my answer “When he put them in there, he felt they were in a safe place, and I’m sure he would not have put anything in the home or garage

that he THOUGHT would hurt you or your children.” In reality he was wrong, had there been a fire the added load could have hurt or killed his family, neighbors or responding firefighters.

Last but not least, if we allow ourselves to follow the old ways, and we get in trouble we must take responsibility for our actions and apologize to our old friends and peers for putting them in a regrettable position. Hey, “Those old days are over,” and if we don’t change with the times we die. I apologize to those old timers who never violated any rules, that is, if you feel offended. Lets be careful out there.

Joe Dempsey retired from the Arapahoe County Sheriff’s Office after 30+ years of service. For 25 of those years he was an active member of the bomb squad. He attended HDS Basic Course B-83-2. He is a past Region II Director; past International Director and current Trustee of the IABTI. He joined the IABTI in 1983.



“The expedient thing and the right thing are seldom the same thing.”
~Charles Brower

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