

# National Center for Explosives Training and Research (NCETR)

Redstone Arsenal, Huntsville, Alabama

by Judy LeDoux

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) is constructing its National Center for Explosives Training and Research (NCETR) at Redstone Arsenal (RSA) in Huntsville, Ala. A ground breaking ceremony for the new facility took place on November 6, 2008, and was attended by approximately 100 people. Featured speakers included ATF Acting Director Michael Sullivan, Deputy Attorney General Mark Filip, and United States Senator Richard Shelby. “The National Center for Explosives Training and Research is a critically-needed training facility that will provide federal, state and local law enforcement with one-stop training in dealing with explosives. As the war on terrorism continues, most experts expect that explosives, from homemade bombs to improvised explosive devices, will continue to be one of our nation’s biggest challenges. The ATF will now lead explosives, forensics, and technology research at Huntsville’s NCETR, the explosives capital of the world,” said Senator Shelby during the ground breaking ceremony.

For nearly four decades, ATF has been the law enforcement organization with unique responsibilities for investigating and enforcing federal statutes and regulations relating to explosives and explosives devices. When Congress passed the Gun Control Act of 1968, which includes provisions for bombs and incendiary devices, it declared that the purpose was to provide support to federal, state, and local law enforcement officials in their fight against crime and violence. In 1970, Congress passed the Organized Crime Control Act, with the purpose to protect the public from criminal acts involving the misuse and unsafe storage of explosives. ATF has maintained primary jurisdiction to enforce the provisions of both the Gun Control Act and the Organized Crime Control Act since becoming a Bureau in 1972.

In 2002, Congress passed the Homeland Security Act, moving ATF from the Department of the Treasury into the Department of Justice, adding “explosives” to ATF’s name, and requiring that ATF establish an explosives training and research center for the purpose of training international, federal, state, and local law enforcement officers and military personnel to safely and effectively investigate bombings and explosions; properly handle, utilize, and dispose of explosive materials and devices; and conduct explosives related research. Various government sites were visited to determine the most suitable location for the NCETR. ATF selected RSA as the permanent site to house ATF’s explosives training and research programs. RSA was selected for a number of reasons, to include the availability of a suitable site for the administrative building, explosives storage availability, a domestic airport at Huntsville, a hazardous waste site on base and exclusive-use range availability.



Equally important, major military and civilian research entities are already located at RSA for collaboration purposes. The main building will house classrooms, explosives examination and research laboratories, and administrative offices. The multi-range complex will be suitable for many activities, from testing everything from large vehicle improvised explosives devices to teaching advanced explosives and disposal operations. It will also provide information-sharing resources available through the U.S. Bomb Data Center (USBDC). The USBDC manages and develops databases utilized by international, federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies. The co-location of USBDC resources will enhance training, research, and investigative efforts through the availability and dissemination of critical law enforcement and intelligence information related to bombings and explosives incidents.

ATF has a longstanding history of fostering the development and growth of training programs for domestic and international law enforcement agencies to enhance their efforts against explosive and bombing related incidents. This project strongly supports the Department of Justice’s (DOJ) and ATF’s mission and strategic goals. Moving the primary venue for ATF’s advanced explosives training courses to RSA will greatly enhance efforts to create a “one-DOJ” explosives training environment. The Hazardous Devices School (HDS), led by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), is well established at RSA, providing federal, state and local bomb technicians with the training that is required to be certified as bomb technicians. With ATF-led courses such as Advanced Explosives Destruction Techniques and Post-Blast Investigation Techniques available at a permanent NCETR facility in the same



location as HDS, and with the associated ability of ATF and the FBI to synchronize their training schedules, a bomb technician can easily transition directly from FBI training into ATF training without leaving the DOJ explosives training “campus.”

ATF’s technical expertise, knowledge, experience and forensic capabilities related to explosives properties, mixtures, devices, products and forensics are extensive. ATF relies on this expertise to provide technically accurate and reliable information to Congress, the public, and law enforcement. Working with the Department of Homeland Security (which is responsible for coordinating overall U.S. Government explosives research efforts) and other interagency partners, the research conducted at NCETR will take three main forms, broadly categorized as:

- Applied research – conducted with the goal to produce data in furtherance of agency objectives to fill a specific need and dedicated to the solution of defined problems
- Testing and Evaluation – a methodology of applied research that can be characterized as those projects that support classifications, rulings and other official ATF determinations concerning explosives products, tools or devices
- Reconstruction and Modeling – research that directly supports specific ongoing criminal or terror investigations and/or prosecutions

The goal of the NCETR is to provide a fully equipped facility where explosive experts can come together to conduct research systematically and scientifically - ensuring that all testing and evaluation is uniform and adheres to stringent scientific standards, as well as departmental guidelines and policies. The NCETR facility is expected to encourage cooperation and information sharing on a global level, strengthening world-wide capabilities to fight explosives related crimes. ATF has already received commitments from numerous civilian and military departments, both foreign and domestic, to participate in the many research and training initiatives expected to take place at NCETR. With NCETR, ATF and its partners will be able to perform state-of-the-art scientific research on the physical characteristics and manufacturing techniques of explosive materials.

To date, ATF has completed the construction of two explosive ranges and a temporary classroom building and anticipates beginning some training activity at the NCETR in the first part of 2009. The U.S. Army Corp of Engineers is responsible for the design and construction of the main ATF building which will house administrative offices, classrooms, research laboratories, and a mock courtroom. The main NCETR facility is scheduled for completion in 2010.

*Ms. LeDoux is the Training Program Manager for the Advanced Explosives Training programs for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) Industry Operations Investigators. Ms. LeDoux is assigned to the Explosives Training Branch, National Center for Explosives Training and Research Center, Ft. A.P. Hill, Virginia, although she maintains an office within the Training and Professional Development Division in Washington, DC.*



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