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The Drug Menace

For firefighters, it means watching where you step and what you touch.

W

BY PHILIP H. McARDLE
Firefighter, Hazardous Materials Co. 1

Well fortified, filled with chemicals, or both, many of the sites where illegal drug trafficking goes on are a special danger to firefighters. These sites require strict precautions during Fire Department operations.

The indications and hazards of a drug operation depend on what's going on at the premises:

■ **Distribution points.** Drug dealers show ruthless creativity in setting booby traps for the uninvited. Booby traps may be mechanical, electrical, chemical, or physical.

Because security is important to a drug distributor, there may be extra locks on the doors and bars on the windows. In what otherwise appears to be a vacant building, slot-type openings cut into doors or sealed-up windows may be signs that drug traffickers are present.

Firearms and ammunition add to the danger. Criminals are more likely to protect themselves against competition and apprehension than fire. If the drug traffickers see that a Fire Department response will find them out, firefighters could easily become targets.

■ **Clandestine laboratories.** Chemical odors are common at clandestine drug labs. Ether is the most widely used chemical, but there are often others. Call for Hazardous Materials Co. 1 if there are any chemical odors you can't identify as being routine. And remember: If you can smell something during the size-up, you're already too close.

Covered windows



Types of drugs

Portable meth labs

Another potential tip-off is that windows are often curtained or opaqued in the rooms where processing is done. In addition, some types of labs have visitors at all hours of the day and night, and people may step outside to smoke, even in bad weather, to be away from explosive vapors.

Most illegal drug labs in New York City are in the business of diluting, or "cutting," cocaine, an organic drug which is smuggled into the United States in pure form. But the U.S. Justice Department reports that clandestine labs manufacturing methamphetamines ("speed" or "crank") from chemicals—previously common only in the Western states—are spreading East.

"Meth" labs have been seized in Westchester County and Philadelphia, but not yet New York City. However, methamphetamine labs move around a lot, and quickly, so they have to be portable. Firefighters could come across carelessly boxed drug-lab materials in vehicle fires or in mini-storage sheds.

The two types of labs have different characteristics:

Cocaine labs tend to operate in middle-to-upper income areas where people think they're safe from drug activity. (Highly publicized seizures in recent years have occurred in Whitestone and Forest Hills.) According to intelligence analyst Jim Kelly of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, these labs keep a low profile. A lab may be set up in a home where normal family activities go on. The paraphernalia is simple, and operators will dump telltale trash in another neighborhood.

BOOBY TRAPS
SIDEBAR: "Meant to Maim," p. 16

Security devices

Firearms

Chemical odors

COCAINE SIDEBAR:
"The Paraphernalia of Cocaine Processing," p. 18

Low-profile cocaine labs

Methamphetamine labs

MET HAMPIET AMNES: Much of the information in this section comes from a federally funded videotape prepared by the California Attorney General's Office and the U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of California. "Clandestine Laboratories: Kitchens of Death" is available for \$10.95 through the production company, Cal Image, 3034 Gold Canal Drive, Suite B, Rancho Cordova, CA 95670. The phone number is (916) 638-8383. Ask for the half-hour law enforcement and fire service version. (A shorter version for the general public is available at the same price.)

Haz-mat types

may smoke outside, even in bad weather, away from the explosive vapors.

Hazardous materials abound at drug labs. The types involved depend on the drug being processed:

Flammable liquids are probably the most abundant. Inside a drug lab, you could be working where chemicals are in the flammable range and not know it.

Explosives may be found in booby traps as well as in mixtures of processing chemicals. Picric acid, for example, becomes a

likely to be booby-trapped, and the processing requires more sophisticated equipment—a variety of laboratory glassware. Operators find it convenient to set up shop in low-income rental properties with absentee landlords; motel rooms; and mobile-home trailers. The "cookers" making the drugs

Clean your turnout gear

high explosive when the moisture evaporates and the material forms crystals. Ether, a flammable liquid, forms explosive peroxides when air gets at it.

Corrosives—acids and bases—can destroy tissue when inhaled or absorbed through the skin. In most cases, turnout gear provides little or no protection.

Oxidizers accelerate any burning that occurs during a fire or explosion. *Firefighters' protective clothing that comes in contact with oxidizers may be totally useless under fire conditions.* It should be thoroughly washed and air-dried before being used in firefighting.

Poisons proliferate in drug labs. Some are toxic in quantities as small as 5 parts per million. To put this in perspective, a chemical present at 10,000 ppm constitutes 1 percent of air's volume.

Infectious medical waste may be present, because some of the people who process drugs are intravenous drug users themselves, and therefore at risk for AIDS.

MEANT TO

BY MIKE ROWLEY

Captain, Evaluation & Training Unit

A drug trafficker's most important enemy is the competition. Handling large stashes of both drugs and money, the drug trafficker has to worry about being robbed, burglarized, or murdered—and resorts to deadly booby traps and heavy-duty security measures as protection.

These devices, in turn, are something the firefighter must worry about.

This is more than speculation. Much of the information here was volunteered by FDNY members attending the safety lecture part of the Fire Academy's Evaluation and Training program. Their units have encountered these devices during fires or on inspection in or near drug establishments.

If you're in the field, you need to take special care for your own safety. Because you could be operating in a booby-trapped drug establishment before you realize that's what it is, you must wear full protective clothing; regulation boots are especially important. Carry a good flashlight.

If you notice a device similar to the ones listed here, you must notify your officer at once so the information can be relayed to all members.

Later, make out a CIDS card so members relocated, detailed, or on overtime will be aware of the danger. When an alarm is transmitted, the firefighter on housewatch should read the teleprinter message out loud; it will start all responding members thinking even before they leave the firehouse.

In addition, you could send a memo to all first-alarm companies informing them of the danger. Make any appropriate referrals, such as an A-8 to the City's Buildings Department.

Nearly all the devices listed here have been found in New York City—and the list isn't all-inclusive. Every day, drug traffickers devise new ways to discourage intruders. We in the Fire Department must keep each other informed, to keep us all safer.

Use this article for drill purposes, and add to it what you find in your own response area. Remember to think before you react.

EXTERIOR

Fire escapes

- Drop ladder missing
- Drop ladder guide missing

- Drop ladder encased in razor wire
- Nuts and bolts missing from drop ladder and stairs
- Stairs broken or missing
- Piano wire across stairs
- Fire escape electrified

Gooseneck ladders

- Ladder missing
- Rungs greased
- Ladder encased in razor wire
- Ladder encased in sheet metal

Windows

- Windows barred
- Bars electrified
- Window sill electrified
- Window panes made of Lexan

Roof

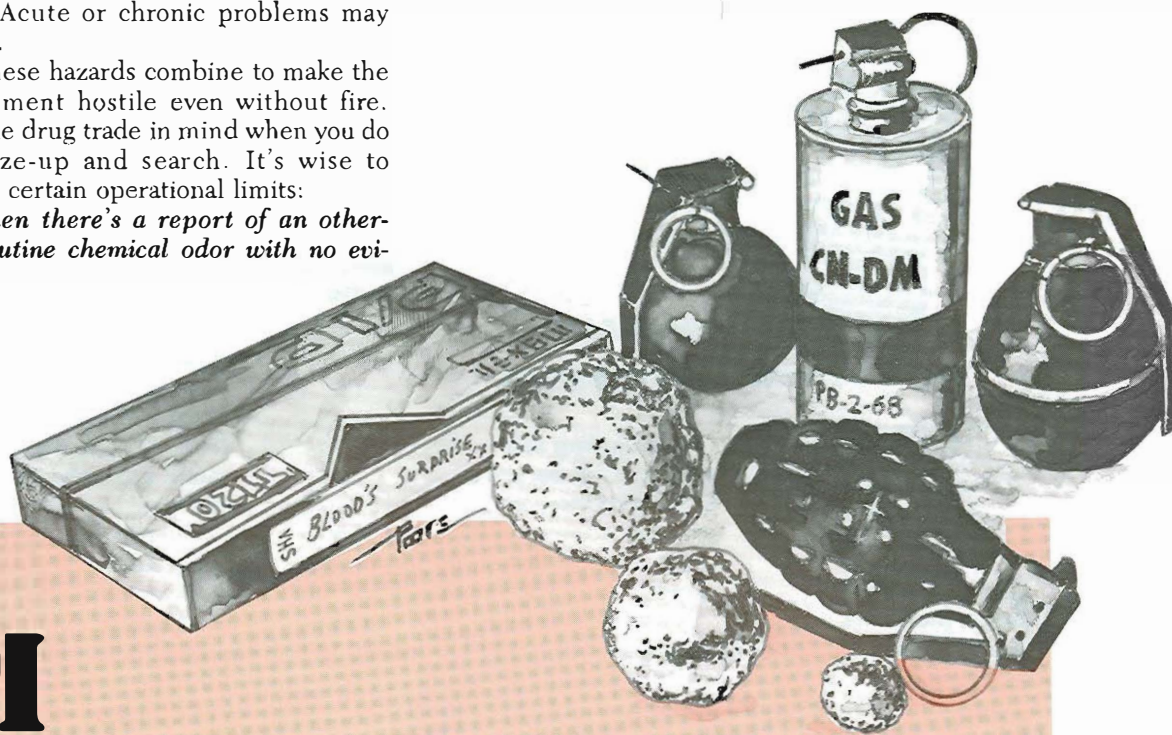
- Razor wire stretched between buildings

In addition to their main threat, many chemicals are also carcinogens (causing cancer), teratogens (causing birth defects), or mutagens (causing genetic changes). Some have very low TLVs (threshold-limit values—the amount to which a person may be exposed over 8 hours without harm). Acute or chronic problems may develop.

Tactics

All these hazards combine to make the environment hostile even without fire. Keep the drug trade in mind when you do your size-up and search. It's wise to observe certain operational limits:

■ *When there's a report of an other-than-routine chemical odor with no evi-*



MAIM

- Roof used as a dog run for pit bulls
- Scuttle cover electrified

INTERIOR

Floors

- Floor missing
- Used needles glued to the floor
- Flooring just inside a door removed, and razor wire inserted between the floor beams

Windows and Doors

- Plywood studded with 3-inch nails, pointed-end up, placed on the floor under a window; the board may be spring-loaded
- Bear trap placed under a window
- Razor wire stretched across the window sill
- Hydrochloric acid placed in a glass where a door being opened

will topple it over into a dish of cyanide crystals, creating hydrogen cyanide gas

Walls and Ceilings

- Steel plates inserted
- Razor wire inserted
- Needles glued to a bulkhead

Hallways

- Fish hooks hung from fish lines across the hallway
- Trip wire stretched across the hallway, in front of a piece of plywood embedded with 3-inch nails

Stairways

- Stairs replaced by a portable ladder
- Razor blades embedded in the bannister
- Scuttle ladder removed from the top of a stairway

Pit Bulls

- Animals starved or beaten to make them more vicious
- Voice box and nails removed to silence the dogs' approach
- Teeth sharpened
- Animals trained to attack the groin

Appliances and Other Objects

- Refrigerators (used to store chemicals and drugs) rigged with a grenade shell full of black powder over the filament of the light bulb, so that the light ignites the grenade when the door is opened
- Balls of aluminum foil made shock-sensitive with red phosphorus, potassium chlorate, and alcohol to explode on contact (see *Safety Message 64*)

- Users' supplies of needles stored on the tops of elevators and in standpipe outlets, with the outlet caps on
- Videotapes treated with chemicals so they explode when inserted into a videocassette player

Defenses Other than Booby Traps

- Apartment door welded to the frame, with a small entrance (less than 2 feet on a side) cut into it
- Windows and other exits sealed with cinder blocks
- Interior doors made of steel
- Gunshots aimed at an OVM who's on the fire escape and mistaken for a robber
- Magnesium in road flares used to destroy evidence

Minimize exposure

Defensive mode

dence of fire. Keep your company's exposure to a minimum. Wear your protective clothing and SCBA. If you suspect a drug lab on the premises, direct the dispatcher to notify the Police Department and have Haz Mat respond.

■ **When there's visible fire, with drug activity suspected.** A defensive mode is suggested. Consider the following actions:

1. **Withdrawing personnel** to limit their exposure to toxic chemicals and possible booby traps.

2. **Discontinuing overhaul.** Nothing in the area should be changed or moved; everything should be considered evidence or a booby trap until a qualified technician

or chemist proves otherwise. No plugs should be pulled from their sockets. Any chemical processes that are going on should be allowed to continue until they're properly evaluated.

3. Shifting the emphasis of the operation to **protecting exposures.**

DECONTAMINATION: See FDNY *Fire Tactics and Procedures*, "Hazardous Materials 2," and "Personal Decontamination," WNYF, 3rd/89, p.16.

All personnel who were in the area must be checked and, if necessary, go through decontamination.

Operations dealing more directly with materials that may be hazardous are the responsibility of **members of Haz Mat 1 and comparably trained personnel from other agencies:**

Evaluation. Because chemical containers aren't always labeled in these settings, samples must be taken to identify them. This is done with a minimum of personnel and no more disruption to the scene than is necessary to make the evaluations. During this stage, monitoring determines if any chemicals are present in quantities in their flammable range.

Handling. As chemicals are identified, open containers are sealed to stop vapors from entering the air. **Members group compatible chemicals and move incompatible ones to other rooms or outside the building.** Spills are cleaned up. Law enforcement personnel might keep small amounts of the chemicals for evidence; the rest is prepared for transport and disposal.

Decontamination. As the chemicals are identified, it becomes possible to determine whether any adverse health effects are likely. Symptoms might already have started showing up among people who were exposed: nausea, vomiting, dizziness, headache, a metallic taste in the mouth, sore throat, shortness of breath, skin redness, or burns. The Emergency Medical Service will supervise decontamination of exposed persons, with or without symptoms. **Haz Mat members will supervise or perform field decon of tools and equipment.**

Back at the firehouse, any member who's been exposed should fill out a CD-73 record of exposure.

At clandestine drug operations even more than elsewhere, things are not always as they appear to be. A simple word can help you remember proper procedures to follow at the scene:

- S** Special-call Haz Mat 1 and the police.
- T** Tactics change: Keep your operating forces to a minimum.
- O** Observe the scene; operate defensively.
- P** Protective equipment worn; protect exposures and evidence.

THE PARAPHERNALIA OF COCAINE PROCESSING

BY JIM KELLY

Intelligence Analyst
New York Field Division
U.S. Drug Enforcement
Administration

Everyday items in abnormal quantities may be signs of a cocaine laboratory. Cocaine processing is a simple affair of placing the cocaine base on a filter over a large container, washing it with a chemical that will make the drug water-soluble, and drying it.

Be suspicious if you find the following items in large quantities:

■ **Plastic trash containers**—in 5- and 35-gallon sizes.

■ **Filters**—commercial coffee filters or cheesecloth.

■ **Room deodorizers**—for masking the smell of chemicals.

■ **Drying stations**—fans, microwave ovens, high-intensity lamps, or natural sunlight.

■ **Smuggling containers**—statues, coffee cans, chocolate, candles, charcoal, towels, guava paste, orange juice cans, wood.

Trying to contain the vapors of the processing chemicals, the lab operators often work in a cocoon-like structure—a wall made of heavy-duty plastic and tape. Usually this is in a corner of the basement, near a window which can be opened at night to let the vapors escape.

Cocaine that will be used for smokeable crack is further refined at "crack houses." The material is boiled with baking soda to remove impurities left behind by the chemicals used in the first stage of processing. Beads of pure material congregate at the top of the water. These are skimmed off and cooled on dry ice or in a refrigerator, becoming hard "crack."

Identities and quantities

Hands-on

Health effects



EXPERIENCE WANTED!

To look at WNYFs of the past, you'd think there's just one fire a quarter in New York City. It's time to find out more of what you're encountering in the field—the lessons that come from on all-hands fire well handled, or from an otherwise routine multiple alarm with one remarkable facet. "Mixer Off" is designed to accommodate these briefer stories—stories that don't usually get much publicity.

Items for Mixer Off can also come from nonfire emergencies, investigations, or inspections. Any short anecdote where a lesson is learned fits the bill. You may also see some "tricks of the trade" that members have tested over the course of many incidents.

Have a message for Mixer Off? Think in terms of a single point you want to make that will fit on two to three pages, typewritten and double-spaced. Then give us a call at (212) 860-9486.

CROSS-TRAINING

Queens box 5270, 109-19 120th Street, July 7, 1990, phone alarm transmitted at 1550 hours

Last year, Engine Co. 308 achieved total turnover. No member has more than 12 years in the job, half have less than five. The company's make-up is one example of why training has to augment experience. And this incident, where the engine did truck work, shows why cross-training has to be part of the schedule.

When we arrived at the three-story, brick, multiple dwelling, we could hear frantic cries for help. A breeze lifted the smoke for a few seconds, and now the voices had faces—a woman and five children were at the third-floor window, getting ready to bail out.

The first-due truck's quarters is a mile away. We had this job by ourselves. Only Battalion 51, which is quartered with us, would be arriving in the coming moments.

The nozzleman started the six-length stretch. The back-up and control members headed for the 25-foot portable extension ladder. I headed for the fire floor to force the door.

When they arrived, the chief and his aide immediately donned their fire gear, turning a four-member company into six. B.C. Alfonso Altenburger helped Fr. Chris Kelleher with the stretch; Fr. John Mazzulo joined firefighters Robert Wilson and Wayne Slater with the rescue.

Wilson was at the top of the ladder, and the mother was passing her 2-, 3-, and 8-year-old children to him. But the older kids and their mom would have trouble getting out the casement-type windows.

A car parked in the driveway, directly under the windows, had prevented the members from getting the ladder into optimum position. Now, car or no car, the ladder had to go under the window. The members placed it on

the trunk, and the last three people were removed.

Firefighters Wilson and Slater returned to the line. Fr. Kelleher had begun knocking down the fire, which had spread to the front foyer from the rear bedroom.

Completing a primary search, the results of which were negative, brought this job to an end.

In the heavy fire duty of the 1960s and early 1970s, skills were honed by catching two, three, or more jobs a tour. Today it's drills, videotapes, and the written word that will give us the know-how we need to protect the public.

—Stephen Kochick
Lieutenant
Engine Co. 308

BYRNE MURDER CASE

Queens box 8823, 107-05 Inwood Street, November 10, 1987, phone alarms transmitted at 0428 and 0625

The testimony of two fire marshals who investigated this job more than three years ago helped secure a related murder conviction. This January, the conviction was upheld on appeal.

It began with two Molotov cocktails thrown, two hours apart, at the home of drug-witness Arjune in Jamaica. When the fire was reported, Queens Fire Marshals Walter Watts (now retired) and Charles Jackson investigated, doing a physical examination to pinpoint cause and origin. They determined the fire to be incendiary. Along with two police officers from the 103rd Precinct, they arrested two suspects on charges of arson first degree and conspiracy second degree. One of the suspects was also charged with resisting arrest, the other with reckless endangerment and criminal mischief. Both were convicted.

But the fire wasn't the end of the violence and threats intended to dissuade Arjune from reporting on drug dealers in his block. So the 103rd Precinct assigned protection—a marked police car parked in front of Arjune's home around the clock.

On the night of February 26, 1988, Police Officer Edward Byrne had the watch. While sitting in the sector car, he was assassinated—shot in the head at point-blank range.

The testimony of Fire Marshals Jackson and Watts, used in establishing the reason why P.O. Byrne was there that night, helped convict the persons responsible for that brutal assassination. The conviction was appealed, but this January, the New York State Appellate Court upheld them.

—Walter McCarthy
Deputy Chief Fire
Marshal
Queens Base

On January 31, an unknown odor in a multiple dwelling on Manhattan's Lower East Side was traced to a hidden cylinder of phosgene gas—the chemical weapon called mustard gas. It recalled an earlier case of unusual hazardous materials in an MD, described here.

—See NITRIC ACID

NITRIC ACID

Manhattan box 374, 21 LeRoy Street, September 30, 1989, phone alarm transmitted at 0044 hours

Ladder 9 was second-due, and once the 10-75 was given, I knew our position would be the floor above the fire.

At the base of the interior

MIXER OFF



stairs, I stepped in a puddle. My feet went out from under me, and I fell flat on my back. The facepiece of my mask splashed in the puddle. I picked myself up—not realizing it was anything but water from a leaky hose butt, since there was no noticeable odor. Firefighters Peter Catherall and Robert Hensworth and I headed up the stairs.

When I put my facepiece on, the mesh webbing and rubber seal were still wet. Soon I felt a tremendous burning sensation on my head and face beneath the

BURN TREATMENT

Paramedics treat Lt. Jimmy Melvin for acid burns. See "Nitric Acid," opposite. Photo by Andrew Savulich

mesh and rubber seal. Now I realized the puddle at the base of the stairs wasn't water; in fact, I had fallen because the liquid—some kind of acid—had started to dissolve the bottom of my boots, making them extremely slippery.

By now, we had forced entry to the apartment, and I tore the facepiece off, yelling to the others to find a sink, fast!

Flicking on the lights, we found the rear of my turnout coat giving off smoke and a red glow. I yelled

again and stripped to my underwear. The right leg of my work/duty pants had melted to a plastic-like consistency, but the acid hadn't penetrated to my skin.

I jumped into the shower. After five minutes, the burning subsided. After five more minutes, I wrapped wet towels around my head and face, and EMS took me to the Cornell Burn Center. The emergency room personnel there washed my head with running water for another 30 minutes.

I had received second-degree burns to my head and face. Where the burns followed the facepiece webbing, my head looked like it had been branded with a mesh-pattern branding iron.

But the burns healed nicely within a month, leaving only a slight pink scar on my jaw. Doctors at the Burn Center tell me the quick application of water to dilute the acid had prevented a much more severe burn.

—James Melvin
Lieutenant
Ladder Co. 9

PROPERTIES

Nitric acid is a poisonous liquid with an acrid, suffocating odor. It can be yellow, red, or colorless.

A reactive oxidizing agent, nitric acid is used in the production of fertilizers, explosives, and rocket fuels, and in a wide variety of industrial metallurgical processes.

If your eyes or any other part of your body come in contact with this material, flush the area with water for at least 15 minutes.

A BOMB AND PHOTOS

Queens box 6913, 164-01 Northern Blvd., September 8, 1990, phone alarm transmitted at 0430 hours

The caller reported that a bomb had exploded on the roof of the National Bartenders School. Queens Fire Marshals Joseph

Manduca (now retired) and Raymond Ross went to the roof of the two-story taxpayer.

From that vantage point, they could see a green shopping bag on the roof of an adjoining, one-story taxpayer. They went to check the bag. Without disturbing it, they looked inside and found eight sticks of dynamite wired to a 6-volt battery.

The fire marshals immediately had the dispatcher notify the Police Department's Bomb Squad. They also summoned the Fire Department's Forensic Unit to photograph the bag and its contents.

When the Bomb Squad arrived, the sergeant used a water cannon to separate the dynamite from the timing device. Examining the device after it was defused, the sergeant said the bomb had been rigged to detonate by remote control. If it had gone off, he said, the bomb would have leveled the whole block.

Later, information from the incident became part of the Bomb Squad's anti-terrorism seminars, presented around the city to employees of banks, the New York Stock Exchange, the military, the Police Academy, and others. Fort Totten Army Base in Queens, where the Bureau of Fire Investigation's Queens Base is located, was the site of one such seminar in January, and the Queens Base marshals were invited. In the slide presentation, the Bomb Squad showed about 15 slides of the bomb that Fire Marshals Ross and Manduca had found on that taxpayer roof.

The fire marshals' role in averting a disaster involved great personal risk and initiative. It's nice to know that the people of New York are hearing about it through public safety education.

—Walter McCarthy
Deputy Chief Fire
Marshal
Queens Base