

City forces battle toxic waste

By BILL FARRELL

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New York City boasts one of the world's largest shipping ports, hundreds of miles of highways, more than 100 bridges, the world's largest sanitary landfill, and thousands of factories and businesses that manufacture, transport and—sometimes illegally—dispose of hazardous materials.

Each day on nearly every street New Yorkers are subjected to potential danger. There have been numerous cases of children playing on the streets of the city on mounds of illegally dumped asbestos, or using for their make-believe games 55-gallon drums of toxic solvents that have been dumped in empty lots.

Yet, when it comes to dealing with hazardous materials, New York has become a world leader.

A little more than a year ago, and without much fanfare, city government made a commitment, declaring war on hazardous materials. Once the decision was made, the campaign on toxic wastes got rolling quickly.



Creation of special units

Last fall, the Sanitation and Fire Departments created new hazardous material units. The Fire Department has spent more than \$1 million on its "HazMat" Unit, and the Sanitation Department Inspector General's office has created a \$600,000 special toxic-dumping-investigations unit.

Early this year, the city's Department of Environmental Protection created a special unit to cope with hazardous and toxic situations. It maintains a team of chemists and investigators that is on call 24 hours a day. The DEP is responsible for the safe disposal of all toxic and hazardous wastes.

These teams, along with specially trained members of the Police Department Emergency Services and Highway Units, form the first lines of defense for New Yorkers.

On any day in the city, they may be asked to challenge the threats from cancer-causing PCBs, toxins leaking from ruptured drums, broken valves along underground gas lines, oil spills, burst and cracked storage tanks and other potentially deadly situations.

HazMat units work together

The dangers can range from chemical fires in the Bronx to the discovery of four long-forgotten jars of potentially explosive picric acid in a Brooklyn high school storage room.

Each member of each team knows the role that must be played. From the moment such incidents are first reported until the people who are responsible are caught and brought to trial, all of the agencies work together as a team.

While there may be interagency rivalry among other city departments, the HazMat units all work together, functioning smoothly as a single unit.

There is no great bowing from the waist, and no agency boasting of its accomplishments over another.

HAZARDOUS Materials Company 1 pose in front of their vehicle and headquarters in Maspeth. At right, fire officer Tom Akenburg checks chemical tank for leaks.

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The people who deal with these situations daily have a genuine admiration and sense of purpose not often found among the city's agencies. A talk with the hazardous-materials people in the Sanitation Department brings praise of their counterparts in the DEP, Police and Fire Departments.

Talk to the men of the Fire Department HazMat unit and they speak of the work accomplished by the other city agencies.

Perhaps Kevin Smyley, the 35-year-old Sanitation Department Inspector General, said it best: "Nowhere have I ever seen the cooperation between city agencies that I see in dealing with this problem. There is a feeling that we all need each other. The people in these units are less concerned with their own egos and more concerned with getting the job done."

The Fire Department HazMat Unit 1, so far the only one in the department, was created in October 1984, and is, according to Deputy Fire Commissioner John Mulligan, "the most up-to-date state-of-the-art hazardous-material unit in the world."

Their equipment ranges from a golf tee to plug small leaks to a

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HAZMAT FROM PAGE ONE

custom-designed truck complete with a computer. "The Fire Department's HazMat unit was the first ever created in the country and is one of only three or four such units in the country," said Mulligan.

"It is such an expensive proposition to have a unit like this that only major cities like New York, Los Angeles or Houston can afford to fund them."

Based in Maspeth, Queens, the Fire Department HazMat unit is made up of five eight-man teams selected from 70 volunteers. "Each of these men must be an experienced firefighter before he is sent for three months of special hazardous-materials training," said Mulligan.

Time, thought, caution

"The thing about dealing with these substances is that it is not like rushing into a fire. With them, you have to determine just what it is you're dealing with before you make a move; you have to take time and think. It requires caution."

In its first year of existence, HazMat responded to more than 650 incidents. Between emergency calls, the members of the unit spend their time checking their equipment or running practice drills to locations where the potential for a major catastrophe exists.

They also meet with representatives from chemical companies to become acquainted with newly created compounds, updating computer files and attending classes.

Their truck, a specially converted pumper, is packed with various types of space-age gear. This includes fully encapsulated suits, an up-to-date library on all types of chemicals, air tanks, cameras, internal communication equipment, gloves, boots and a cellular telephone.



FIRE OFFICER Kevin Smith suits up in protective suit with help from fellow officer Phil McArdle.

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Equipped with computer

It also contains a computer which prints out in minutes the history and composition of millions of substances, complete with directions for medical treatment of persons exposed to these materials.

"We have to update sections of our library monthly and bimonthly," said the unit's Jim Mushlit, as he conducted a tour of the truck. "There are thousands of new chemicals created every month and, as they are created, we put all the material into our data bank."

The unit has three different types of protective suits, gloves and boots, said Mushlit, "because not all materials are compatible with all chemicals. These suits and gloves are our first line of protection, and we must be sure we are wearing the proper type suit."

Some of the equipment used by the unit has been designed by the members themselves.

Each of the eight-member teams consists of a two-man response unit, a backup team of two, an officer and the resource man, who sits at the computer, feeding information from the scene to a main computer, alerting the men at the incident as to just

what they may be dealing with. The other two members provide whatever other aid might be needed.

"Never really sure"

"Our equipment is the finest available, but even the manufacturers will not guarantee everything works," said Tom Merker, another HazMat member. "So everytime we go into a situation, we're never really sure how safe we are."

Gil Sullivan of the unit pointed out this danger when he spoke of two firefighters, one in Texas and one in Louisiana, who lost their lives during the past year in fighting fires involving hazardous materials.

"We're like the Police Department Bomb Squad. We deal in unknowns, explosives, flammables, radioactives, biologicals. We don't rush. We make our plays like a football team.

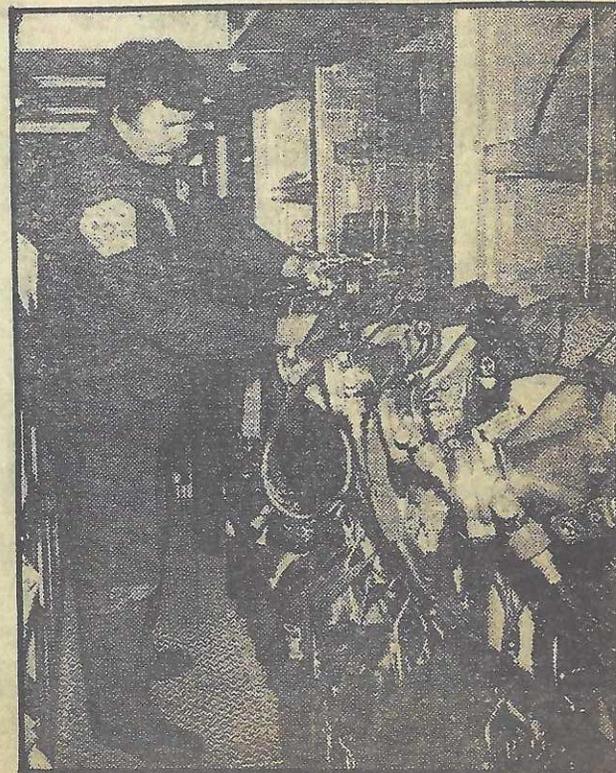
"There's always something more we can learn. We go to the experts. With this stuff there is no one person who knows it all."

Sullivan said that the unit has been fortunate, in that it has not had any serious injuries or fatalities. "We want to keep it that way. We don't need any plaques for our wall."

Tomorrow: A look at the city's Department of Sanitation and Department of Environmental Protection HazMat Units.



LEFT: Smith uses portable computer to gain info on chemicals.



RIGHT: McArdle checks breathing apparatus on truck.