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A Fire Dept. Unit Specializes in Hazardous Materials Blazes

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Special to the New York City Tribune

At 3:30 on a recent morning, the beeping and booping alarm went off in the quarters of the Fire Department's Hazardous Materials Company No. 1. The dispatcher's voice followed, saying: "Haz-mat respond to Manhattan for a transformer fire."

The company was quickly out of bed, suited up and on the apparatus floor. The firehouse came to life as two customized fire trucks grunted to a start, and their warning lights came on. They pulled out into a light rain and headed for the Queensboro Bridge.

In this case they were responding to a fire which might involve toxic, PCB-laden oil, and couldn't be approached safely by conventional fire fighting

companies. For Hazardous Materials Company No. 1, known as the Haz-mat unit, this was nothing unusual.

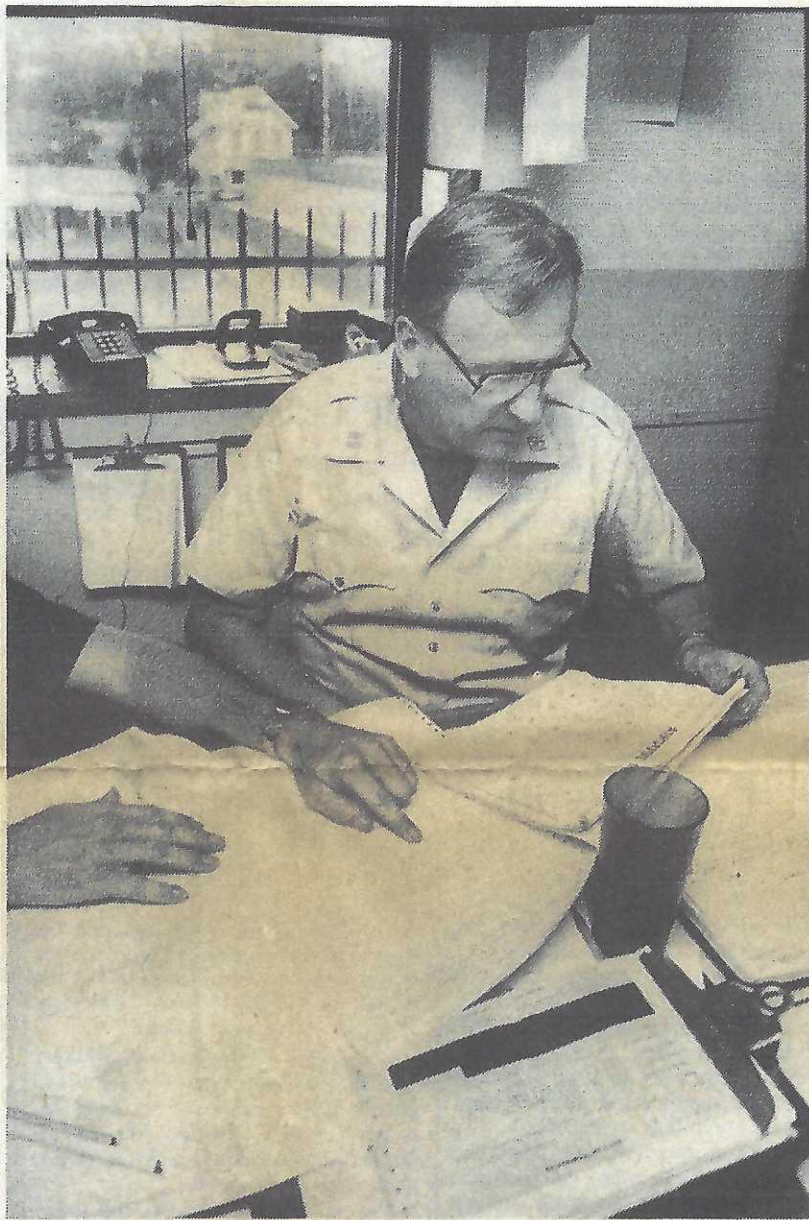
One thing Haz-mat has in common with the rest of the Fire Department is that they expect the unexpected, and are ready to respond 24 hours a day. Being a unique and specialized unit, they are assigned to protect the entire City rather than just a neighborhood.

Although the unit is quartered in a

76-year-old firehouse, which they share with Engine Company 288, they are the most modern element of the Fire Department, and are nationally recognized for their expertise.

"Hazardous materials" is a catch-all phrase, used to describe any substance — often man-made — which poses a threat to health or the environment. The Haz-mat unit was established to respond to such emergencies. In 1989 the number of dangerous substances which

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CAPT. HOWARD KENNEDY, Haz-mat unit commander, catches up on paperwork at his headquarters office.

with dikes.

New dangers have also emerged

“Members of the Haz-mat unit receive no special compensation or pay for their high-risk occupation.”

without scuba equipment — and swim to the rescue of the trapped passengers.

If one event can be credited with inspiring the creation of the Haz-mat unit, it is the George Washington Bridge accident of 1980, with which all members of the unit are familiar.

A tank truck carrying 9,000 gallons of liquid propane gas started to leak on a Manhattan-side off-ramp. The explosive fuel was spraying out under high pressure, in a densely populated area, creating a potential for disaster, should it ignite. Through the resourceful efforts of FD Rescue Unit No. 4 — there is one for each borough — the leak was temporarily plugged, so the truck could

The Fire Department realized, however, that they were not well prepared for that type of emergency. The solution was to create a special unit beyond the five rescue units, whose entire purpose would be to respond to

“The company is primarily made up with the founding members, who are devoted to it.”

these hazardous material emergencies, which often don't involve fire. Consequently, the Haz-mat unit is equipped with an array of hardware and tools, which can plug or fill any leak.

Compared to firefighting, which has been a recognized service for more than 300 years, Haz-mat response is in its infancy. There are other major differences. Firefighters have a good idea of what they'll face when they arrive at a fire.

“Haz-mat [however], is a slow, hair-pulling operation; not every firefighter can make the transition to Haz-mat,” says firefighter and Haz-mat technician Danny Pontecorvo.

Necessary Caution

Like a surgical procedure, a Haz-mat operation is carefully planned and executed. The members of the unit work slowly and cautiously, treating each incident as a new and unpredictable situation.

“Haz-mat expects the unexpected, and is ready to respond 24 hours a day.”

The unit is information-intensive. When confronted with a dangerous or unknown substance, the designated “resource” man of the team will begin the research. Using an onboard computer printout, chemical library and mobile phone, he has access to an incredible amount of information, including two computer data bases on chemistry. The unit prefers to operate only when they have background information on a substance from three different sources.

Making Haz-mat an even more time consuming job is the interagency cooperation required. The Police, Dept. of Sanitation, Emergency Medical Service, Dept. of Environmental Conservation

Expels Zhivkov, Its Ex-Leader, Corruption and Lavish Living

ions Are 'a Test'



TODOR ZHIVKOV: *has been accused of owning 13 opulent official residences and six hunting lodges.*

iven sole power.

One defines the party as "the leading force" in society and the state, and the other says the party "heads the construction of an advanced socialist society."

As the Central Committee meeting drew to a close, a crowd estimated by Western reporters at 60,000 gathered in the plaza outside to show support in a rally sponsored by the party.

the Agrarian Union, the only other legal party the communists allowed.

Mladenov has moved swiftly to oust Zhivkov's associates from the ruling party Politburo in favor of people more likely to embrace reform.

In a speech to the Central Committee on Monday, Mladenov said the party should start talks with independent groups immediately and relinquish the guarantee of sole power, as has been done in Poland, Hungary, East Germany and Czechoslovakia. He proposed that free elections be held by May.

Zhivkov was removed from the Central Committee last week and his son was kicked out of the committee and all other party posts in November.

Balev, who was Zhivkov's private secretary for many years, was ousted from the Politburo soon after the downfall of his boss.

Andrei Lukanov, considered second in the new hierarchy after Mladenov, told the Central Committee today "there are full grounds for detailed investigation of the income and expenses" of Zhivkov and his family, BTA reported.

Lukanov heads a new party committee on corruption that is investigating "financial and other violations by Zhivkov, his family and his closest circle; cases of profiteering; cases of corruption and the abuse of power for personal favors," and other allegations, BTA said.

Many speakers at the Tuesday committee session criticized Zhivkov and said anyone associated with him



WELL PROTECTED, *Haz-mat unit members search a garbage strewn vacant lot in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant district for medical waste.*

PHOTOS BY NICHOL

(state), Environmental Protection Agency (City) and other services all have specific roles in the handling of Haz-mat incidents. And, they may all have to be at a scene before the Haz-mat unit can operate.

The members of the Haz-mat unit must be personally credited with its success and progress. The company is primarily made up with the founding members, who are devoted to it. All brought with them an area of expertise and an enthusiasm, which made the unit possible.

The complex nature of the hazardous materials field requires that the Haz-mat responder be constantly informed and educated. The company fought for City funding for their education, which takes them to special schools and seminars around the country. Many of the classes are given at a special federal school, where Haz-mat units from all over the country meet, study and compare notes.

The stress on education means mem-

estimate of its danger, they will assume the most dangerous as their basis for approach.

“Ten years ago, leaking or spilled fuel would have been flushed down the nearest drain.”

They also accept a lot of industry recommendations “tongue in cheek,” says Scotty Kirchoefer, the protective suit specialist. If the textbook says an exposure of 10 minutes is acceptable, they will assume it’s safe for 5.

The Haz-mat van carries a large and varied amount of tools. Kevin Smith, who is the meter specialist, can list the

rights.

There is patching, plugging and gasket material in sizes appropriate for kitchen pipes or oil refinery tanks. The hydraulic jacks and air-powered lifting bags can easily right an overturned tank truck or rail car.

A duplicate set of inexpensive hand tools is carried. They can be thrown out without great loss, should they be used for work on a contaminating substance. The list goes on and on.

The Haz-mat unit is equipped with and trained in the use of different protective suits. Some are inexpensive and disposable. Others, like the most protective Level “A” suits, may cost up to \$2,000.

Used in the most dangerous situations, they are like space suits, totally self-contained — including air-supply — and isolating the user from the environment. Even these suits, however — and they are the best in the industry — offer only limited protection and are ineffective against some substances.



TRYING TO RACE along the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, the Haz-mat unit's rolling operations center responds to an emergency.

away from their families. And unlike most other units nationwide, the New York Haz-mat unit receives no special compensation or pay for the high-risk occupation.

The fire house of the Haz-mat unit is unique in having a classroom library where classes or conferences are held. The commitment to the Haz-mat field is apparent even as the company is having dinner. While there is a lot of kidding around and amusement at the table, the conversation will shift easily to the merits of a new PCB test kit, or the various approaches to fires involving pesticides.

The operative word in the Haz-mat unit, along with education, is safety. Special equipment, tools and planning all necessary. If their research on a substance comes up with three different

compartments from memory. Among the items are meters for testing air contents, a chemical testing kit and a radiation test kit.

“New dangers, such as PCBs, have emerged since Haz-mat response was developed.”

If they must operate in an explosives atmosphere, there is a set of special non-sparking hand tools, grounding equipment and “explosion proof” flash-

company is, the Haz-mat response is still a very dangerous job. As Scotty K. puts it: “There’s no meter we carry that will tell us ‘Danger, cyanide — get out!’.”

In this City the trend of fires has slid downward since the arson years of the late 1960s and 70s. The Fire Department may be approaching the limits of its expansion in the fire suppression field. Like other big-city Fire Departments, it has looked to the future and seen that in the 21st century they will have a role in a variety of public safety areas. Mitigating hazardous material is an important service, which unlike fire suppression, is a growing threat.

As one member of the Haz-mat unit says, “This summer was just the tip of the iceberg.”

Nine Podiatrists Indicted For NYC Medicaid Fraud

ALBANY, Dec. 13 — Nine New York City-area podiatrists, including four college instructors and a former dean, have been indicted for Medicaid fraud.

Edward Kuriansky, the state’s special prosecutor for Medicaid fraud, told reporters today that the nine doctors stole more than \$56,000 from Medicaid in 1985. The doctors billed Medicaid for high-priced foot braces while they really gave their patients “cheap stock goods,” Kuriansky said.

The nine doctors are: Charles Robert Spatz, Mark Gventer and Steve Magier of Brooklyn; Mary Anne Alongi, Julian Scott Davis and Eric Schwartz of Long Island; and Neil Beitch, Gary Fischman and Lloyd Kahn of Rockland County.

They are charged with grand larceny and offering a false instrument for filing. Kahn is former dean of the New York College of Podiatric Medicine, while Schwartz is a former dean of clinical education at the college — the only podiatry school in the City, where several of them teach.

Tribulations

