

New Hazmat Risk for First Responders

Situational Awareness Considerations

INTRO

There have been two recent documented cases of the use of industrial/household chemicals as a method to commit suicide that can expose responders (Fire, EMS, and Law Enforcement) to a hazardous materials risk. The method involved mixing two readily available, household chemicals to produce a flammable, noxious gas. The resulting gas causes the victims to go unconscious and suffer heart failure.

Two documented cases, one in California and the other in Georgia, involved two young men, both in their 20's. Both men had locked themselves in the vehicles prior to mixing the chemicals. Each left a visible note on the car warning people of the dangerous chemicals. The vehicle in Georgia had been taped to prevent the gas from escaping.

RESPONSE

- Responders are advised to conduct a thorough "windshield survey" of the scene. In this case the scene may be more dangerous than the routine "person down in a car".
- Responders should be very cautious of any activities, vehicles or materials that arouse your curiosity.
- Responders should look for unusual indicators such as notes, unusual/chemical containers, taped windows/vents, unusual smoke or fumes, etc.
- If noxious fumes are smelled or visible upon approach, done respiratory protection as fast as possible while backing out. Re-enter only after proper respiratory and dermal protection are worn. These improvised suicide agents are dermal as well as respiratory hazards.
- If dispatched to a "suspicious incident" or "hazmat incident with injury" scan the area using binoculars or spotting scopes before approaching.
- Once determined, scene is a hazmat incident. Establish hazard control zones (Hot, Warm and Cold) and initiate hazmat procedures also making appropriate notifications if presented with this scenario.
- Immediately establish Incident Command System (ICS) to develop a plan of action and coordinate response activities and resources.

- As materials may be mixed or in unlabeled/mislabeled containers utilize DOT ERG 2008 (Emergency Response Guidebook) 111 (Mixed Load/Unidentified Cargo) for guidance.
- Command will need to make an immediate decision for "life rescue" or "wait and hold". If believed to be an "unconscious victim" rescue responders should don appropriate PPE and SCBA to breach window or door to affect a quick rescue.
- Responders should be warned that Air-Purifying Respirators (APR) or Powered Air-Purifying Respirators (PAPR) are not adequate for this response. The best choice can be open circuit or closed circuit and NIOSH-approved industrial SCBA or NIOSH-approved CBRN SCBA (Self Contained Breathing Apparatus).
- Reminder this scenario is also a crime scene and must be treated as such.

All information is OPEN SOURCE and based on the latest reporting and assessments. *This information should be used only as an educational guide and responders should always follow their local guidelines and procedures.*

This awareness guide is designed to help responders understand the nature of current and emerging threats. It is for use by U.S. public safety agencies and special operations assets such as those with critical infrastructure protection, tactical teams, bombs squads, weapons of mass destruction, fusion centers and others.

AUGUST VERNON works in emergency management and provides specialized emergency services planning and training for critical incidents. Direct questions or comments to Vernon at fdtac@yahoo.com The "First Responders Critical Incident Guide" is available from Red Hat Publishing at <http://www.redhatpub.com/>