

Labs, leaks all in a day's work for Haz Mat

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Oct. 25, 2013 |

thecalifornian.com



Capt. Peter Robbert, right, helps a fellow firefighter into a haz-mat suit Friday at Salinas Fire Station 1.

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Capt. Peter Robbert, right, helps a fellow firefighter into a haz-mat suit Friday at Salinas Fire Station 1. / Patricia Waldron/The Salinas Californian

It could have been Monterey County's own version of "Breaking Bad."

The weirdest call that Seaside fire Capt. Chris Schnute of the Monterey County haz mat team says he ever responded to was an abandoned meth operation in 2008. A junior high school chemistry teacher had been cooking meth in a rental house and left the chemicals behind. Buckets of red phosphorous sat out in the open, and unidentified chemical waste had eaten through a kiddie pool in the backyard.

Members of the fire departments in the county who are interested in chemistry and who wish to go above and beyond the already dangerous job of responding to fires can volunteer for what is officially known as the Monterey County Operational Area Hazardous Materials Response Team. Whenever any Monterey County fire department responds to a call and observes a potentially "hazardous condition," "Haz Mat" will be called in to evaluate the situation. The team receives 10 to 12 calls per day, but most end up being false alarms.

"Every hazardous condition call that we get has great potential to be something bigger, and you just never know," Capt. Dan Green of the Salinas Fire Department said Friday.

While firefighters can rapidly evaluate a situation and rush in to be the first responders, the Haz Mat team moves slower. They will first try to isolate the source of the contamination and then determine a plan of action. Even if a situation ends up being non-hazardous, it still takes 4 to 5 hours to make a plan, suit up, sample the chemical, get out, and fill out the paperwork.

"Being a haz mat technician or specialist is like being a detective," Schnute said. "You've got to evaluate the situation, get as much information as you can, and then try to fit all the little pieces together to get a positive outcome."

Even just getting their suits on takes five to 10 minutes. The orange plastic suit has a clear face mask, booties that go into rubber boots, two sets of gloves and its own oxygen tank. Not surprisingly, the suit is heavy, bulky and hot. On a summer day the internal temperature might rise to 130 degrees. A technician's boots are sometimes filled with perspiration that trickled down during the operation.

Many of the calls the team responds to are unidentified or dumped chemicals. About three weeks ago in downtown Monterey, a suspicious backpack with bottles and tubes was discovered in a bathroom. The Haz Mat team first called in the bomb squad. After the bomb robot emerged with photos of the backpack, it was clear that it was a miniature meth lab that had been abandoned by the meth cook.

Meth-making operations that have gone bad are just one type of call that the area Haz Mat team handles. The team has responded to crashed and leaking tanker trucks, agricultural chemical spills, ammonia leaks at ag processing facilities, suspicious white powders in threatening letters and broken mercury thermometers.

“Homes are the biggest haz mat there is,” Schnute said. “Think about things under the cupboards and in the garages.”

Recently, the Haz Mat team has also responded to a rash of fires caused by drug users attempting to make hash oil with the butane from lighters. Several people around the state have started fires in apartments, or even killed themselves, while using this method to concentrate the active substance in marijuana.

An increasing number of calls are “chemical suicides,” where a person will suffocate himself by mixing up dangerous chemicals inside an enclosed car. These suicides present a hazard to anyone who opens the car door.

“Sometimes they’ll leave notes saying ‘Don’t open the door’ but other times they won’t,” Schnute said.

One type of call that the Haz Mat team rarely receives these days are reports of suspicious white powders that people have mistaken for deadly anthrax. After a series of anthrax-laced letters killed five in 2001, local fire departments received 40 or 50 white powder calls per day. All of the white powders were eventually identified as harmless substances such as chalk or baking soda.

Firefighters who volunteer to be on the Haz Mat team must first undergo extensive training in basic chemistry and methods to identify unknown substances. They also rehearse different scenarios, such as shutting down a broken valve on a chemical tank or entering a building to sample a chemical spill.

To keep their knowledge current, the team receives special training to handle different types of hazards. They recently visited the Nevada National Security Site — where the U.S. government tested nuclear bombs — to learn about safely dealing with radiation. Schnute and Green have also attended a bomb school in New Mexico and visited a chemical weapons storage site in Alabama. Weekly and quarterly drills keep their skills sharp.

Considering the dangerous situations the Haz Mat team willingly enters, some might wonder why a person would volunteer for this extra duty.

Capt. Peter Robbert of the Salinas Fire Department echoed the words of a previous captain who said he joined because he “always wanted to be the one knowing what’s going on.”

“I wanted to know more,” Schnute said. “I wanted to be able to know what it’s going to take to keep my crew safe.”