



Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen

A Division of the Rail Conference of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters

Terror on the Tracks

(The following article by Carl Prine was posted on the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review website on January 14.

PITTSBURGH -- Let's say the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review reporter really was a terrorist.

What if those were bombs he was placing on the chemical placard of a rail car inside the Thatcher Chemical Co. plant in suburban Las Vegas, and not his business cards?

Instead of a camera recording lax security over some of the deadliest chemicals ever produced, he held a detonator? And the string of chlorine gas cars trundling down Union Pacific Railroad tracks in the heart of Vegas was his prey?

If he was a terrorist, and his goal was to release a potentially catastrophic cloud of deadly gases, explosives and caustic acids -- in unguarded cars, left abandoned -- then a U.S. Department of Homeland Security's planning scenario might apply: 17,500 people dead, another 10,000 suffering injuries and 100,000 more flooding trauma wards, convinced they've been poisoned. The environmental damage would take weeks to clean up, forcing the evacuation of as many as 70,000 residents from a city built on sin, military might and heavy industry.

Less detailed and unlikely "Worst Case Scenario" plans filed with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency suggest the gases that could be released by the reporter perched atop millions of pounds of zinc chloride, phosphoric and sulfuric acids, and chlorine gas could drift 18 miles and threaten 1.1 million people with death, displacement or injury.

But, luckily, he was only a reporter.

Five years after terrorists murdered 2,996 people in the Sept. 11 attacks, the Trib embarked on a probe to see how well railroads and their customers secure lethal hazardous materials -- termed "hazmat" by first responders. The road map: Reports compiled since 2003 by the Federal Railroad Administration detailing defects in the way railroads and chemical plants conducted counter-terrorism security planning and worker training.

Armed with that data, the Trib penetrated 48 plants and the freight lines that service them to reach potentially catastrophic chemicals in populated parts of Seattle, Tacoma, Atlanta, Pittsburgh, Las Vegas, San Francisco's Bay Area and the New Jersey suburbs, as well as two port facilities in Oregon and Washington.

"What you uncovered is a criminal tragedy, and it's a criminal tragedy that's just waiting to happen. It's also criminal what we haven't done about this," said U.S. Sen. Joseph Biden, D-Delaware, who has sponsored legislation designed to revamp rail hazmat security nationwide and pledges to hold hearings on the issue.

Biden has taken at least 7,000 round trips by rail from his home in Wilmington to Washington, D.C., since entering the Senate in 1972. He routinely talks to railworkers, and when he pulls into a depot, he scans for hazmat tankers, guards and gates.

He loves railroads so much that he wants to protect them by slashing tax cuts and take the extra cash to fund every recommendation of the 9/11 Commission that investigated the 2001 attacks. He demands more federal cops in the rail yards, more cameras and gates, less dangerous chemicals on the tracks and rerouting of particularly lethal shipments around big cities.

"All you have to do is look," Biden said. "I can walk into a freight yard right now, and I can put plastique explosive on a railcar and detonate it. This is a distant concern to many people in Washington, D.C., but I see and I hear about it every day and we have to do something about it."

The Association of American Railroads, with a membership hauling almost 90 percent of the nation's hazmat tank cars, said

freight security has improved since 2001 but conceded more has to be done to protect 240,000 miles of mostly unguarded line.

"You've got to remember the open architecture of railroads," said Nancy Wilson, AAR vice president and director of security. "We're not static facilities. We cannot protect every railcar, every rail yard or every customer's facility all the time."

In the years since the Sept. 11 attacks, intelligence tips have warned about U.S. chemical plant targets and terrorists have hit freight trains abroad. Still, Homeland Security and the AAR insist there's no indication that terrorists are plotting hazmat rail attacks in the U.S. now.

Good thing, because the Trib found:

Little visible differences in security between the largest and smallest train lines. The Trib easily reached hazmat shipments or locomotives controlled by 12 railroads, ranging from giant Union Pacific to the tiny, city-owned Tacoma Municipal Beltline. Workers never challenged the reporter as he climbed trains, photographed derailing levers or peeked into signaling boxes controlling rail traffic.

No police presence. Despite long trips down tracks nationwide, no rail cops detained the reporter. At a Clifton, N.J., station where explosive railcars hug teeming commuter lines, a Transit Police cruiser idled unconcerned while the reporter spent an hour around hazmat cars. According to the railroads, fewer than 2,300 cops patrol the tracks, about one for every 100 miles.

Shoddy security even at 11 refineries, railroads and chemical plants bound by "stringent" voluntary guidelines created by the AAR and other industries. The Trib penetrated security at four railways adhering to AAR's guidelines. Seven plants that had voluntarily upgraded security to meet standards of their trade groups also had tracks open to terrorists.

No executive at a large railroad would talk to the Trib about the newspaper's findings. Local and state security officials in California, Washington and Georgia also were silent when the Trib tried to discuss hazmat security.

The Nevada Homeland Security Commission, however, is investigating shortfalls uncovered by the Trib's Vegas vacation.

"Closing gates, making sure workers and guards and police are aware of our chemicals, that's important," said Commission Supervisor Larry Casey. "Unfortunately, the farther we get from 9/11, the more people forget about staying vigilant."

"Then there's the funding issue. The federal pot gets smaller and smaller. The farther we get from the major event in our lives, the threat goes up while the money to stop it goes down."

In 2001, five of the 19 al-Qaida terrorists visited Las Vegas before hijacking airliners for suicide missions to Manhattan and Washington, D.C.

Las Vegas annually hosts more than 37 million visitors. The city received about \$28 million in federal counter-terrorism funding last year, but officials have been told that's being scaled back, leaving almost nothing for safeguarding the tracks latticing the city.

According to Homeland Security's Inspector General, 90 percent of taxpayer anti-terrorism funding has gone to protecting aviation. In 2006, \$4.6 billion flowed to securing U.S. airports, leaving \$32 million for safeguarding surface transportation, including railroads.

The Burning of Atlanta

Following FRA's deficiency reports to 12 facilities near Atlanta, the Trib found numerous security snafus in one of Dixie's largest cities.

Along CSX lines in Dekalb County, a Trib reporter climbed unguarded stores of deadly insecticides, flammable petroleum distillates and acetone, a chemical that can trigger a vapor cloud explosion if leaked.

Since 2003, FRA has noted 53 defects with CSX counter-terrorism planning and training in five states, including Georgia.

A year ago, FRA reported that Bulkmatic's plant in the Atlanta suburbs failed to properly address potential intruders. A fence "locked" with almost 2 feet of slack meant a Trib reporter could stroll by employees there who made no effort to challenge him. Federal inspectors had previously written up Bulkmatic chemical operations there and in Buffalo and Chicago for security problems.

After visiting Alchem's Atlanta's caustic soda operation in 2005, an inspector wrote, "Is there a fence? Is facility manned 24 hours a day?"

In September, the Trib found the answer was, "No."

In Marietta, Ga., the Trib reached hundreds of thousands of pounds of acrylic acid, a highly explosive chemical with choking fumes, stowed on the tracks near several factories. Woodbridge Corp.'s toluene diisocyanate railcars in Lithonia also were unguarded. If ruptured, the chemical can cause severe burns or death as gases seek out moist human flesh.

Bombs also easily could have been placed on propane, caustic soda and fuming sulfuric acid tankers and vats in nearby Carroll, Fulton and Gwinnett counties, causing massive explosions and corrosive gas releases.

Atlanta and Georgia homeland security officials declined to comment on the Trib's findings. Neither would Alchem, Bulkmatic, Woodbridge and CSX.

"To me, this is a no-brainer for terrorists in Atlanta or anywhere else," said Sal DePasquale, a Georgia State University expert on counter-terrorism and retired security director for chemical titan Georgia Pacific. "It's toxic material. It's unprotected. If you're a railroad or a chemical plant and you won't have someone ready to kill the adversary ready to attack your plant, then what can you do?"

"What's happened here is simple. Railroads were constructed and industry grew up along them. Then people came to live near the industry. Railroads by their nature are open to access and now we have to figure out how to protect them. Do we reach the point where we say, 'In the interest of public health and safety, we're going to close down your ability to ship toxic material?' What happens then? It's a tough question to answer."

West Coast swing

For almost three weeks, a Trib reporter followed the rails from Seattle to San Francisco to Las Vegas. Of 23 railroads, chemical facilities and seaports hit with FRA security defects, the Trib penetrated 18 of them in Washington, Oregon, California and Nevada.

Two years after FRA found security plan defects at Cascade Columbia Distribution's Seattle warehouse, a Trib reporter found himself underneath stacks of explosive hydrogen peroxide, toxic ferrous chloride, blinding fluorosilicic acid and deadly muriatic acid.

With cameras, roving patrols and high fences, Pioneer America's Tacoma bleach plant seeks to bar terrorists from chlorine railcars. But a Trib reporter walked past rail switching levers and safety chocks to 90 tons of deadly gas abandoned by the Tacoma Municipal Beltline Railroad outside the gates. In 2004, FRA reported the railway failed to create a security plan and the Trib certainly didn't find one that kept chlorine gas safe from intruders two years later.

According to EPA "Worst Case Scenario" filings, a catastrophic chlorine tank rupture there could push gas to as many as 14 miles, threatening 900,000 people.

"We can't switch out the chlorine on our own," said Pioneer's plant manager, George Karscig. "The railroad brings in the cars. There are some days when they come and they don't make the switch and that's what you found when you came here."

Karscig immediately ensured that his guards policed railroad tracks Pioneer doesn't own.

Union Pacific's bustling yard bisects Martinez, Calif., and the sprawling Shell refinery that brews large quantities of Liquid Petroleum Gas there. The Trib found Shell's safeguarding of 10 million pounds of highly explosive isopentane to be rigorous. That's important, because vapors released by a terrorist could trigger a flash explosion across much of the seaside town, according to EPA files.

In Nevada, a Trib reporter would simply wait for a Pioneer factory to disgorge its deadly chlorine and caustic soda tankers to an unguarded rail spur owned by Union Pacific. Although the Trib decorated Union Pacific hazmat tankers with more than 100 business cards from Vegas to Seattle, the company won't discuss it.

"Our only statement is that we believe what you did is dangerous and we strongly encourage people to stay away from railroad tracks," said railroad spokesman Jim Barnes.

A Jersey state mind

In the crowded New Jersey suburbs rimming New York City, the Trib found tougher chemical plant security than any other place. But track protection was no better than other states, and of 48 facilities and railroads found to have security defects by FRA, the Trib entered 12 of them in July.

At the Black Prince Distillery in Clifton, N.J., explosive tankers share space with passenger trains on New Jersey Transit's bustling Mainline from Manhattan. A Trib reporter eased past video cameras and a patrolling police cruiser three times during trips in and out of the plant and along the tracks, even while commuter cars zipped by.

That concerned Richard Cañas, director of the New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness.

"The storage of hazardous material on commuter rail lines is something to be considered and that scenario goes to my biggest fear -- mass transit," he said. "In our state, you've got a high population density. You have rail out the kazoo that moves at a lightning pace. There are things we do, like ramping up vigilance, conducting searches, doing shows of force. But this is expensive and must be sustained for it to be effective."

A Trib reporter followed bums under a bridge and through the woods to a large depot run by Conrail to service refineries stretching from Sewaren to Perth Amboy along "The Chemical Coast" line. On tracks stacked almost a mile deep with highly explosive chemicals, the reporter climbed tankers and waved at nearby trucks.

Adding another two chemical plants in Parlin and Carteret, a pair of propane warehouses, an Edison distiller and the railroads connecting Morristown, Whippany, Dayton, Tennent, Ringoes and Newark, a coordinated attack on Garden State hazmat reached by the Trib would have released enough deadly ethylene oxide, toxic methylamine, explosive LPG, lethal hydrogen chloride and flammable denatured alcohol to threaten 527,000 people, according to EPA documents filed by the companies themselves.

Once informed of the Trib's breaches and delivered photos of unguarded chemicals, New Jersey's Homeland Security experts sped to sensitive sites to probe what went wrong. That wasn't unexpected. Like Michigan, Trenton has fully merged state police and emergency management agencies so that a threat potentially impacting the environment or public health draws rapid law enforcement scrutiny, too.

The state is creating an intelligence hub linked to other high-target regional cities and states to better track vulnerabilities. Although New Jersey law already requires stiffer security at chemical plants than what's found in other states, Cañas said voluntary efforts at high-risk factories often work, too.

Trib stakeouts at Dupont, Air Products, Shell and ExxonMobil plants found outstanding perimeter and rail yard protection -- despite earlier FRA defects -- forcing the reporter to seek softer targets along the rails, something terrorists might do, too.

"New Jersey has done a lot," said Cañas. "But we're still extremely vulnerable in some areas. You exposed some of that -- there's no denying that -- but I think overall there's a spirit of cooperation here that you won't find in other states."

Why?

"They still feel 9/11," said Cañas. "They feel it every day. They haven't forgotten."

Monday, January 15, 2007

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