

THE FIREWORK INCIDENT IN ENSCHEDE. SCENE OF CRIME INVESTIGATION

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ABSTRACT: In the Netherlands the expertise of technical explosive investigation of the scene of crime is centralised in an emergency response team. This team is available throughout the entire country for technical assistance and consists of specialised scene of crime officers assisted by the Netherlands Forensic Institute, Explosive Ordnance Disposal and the Central Criminal Intelligence Service. The way of operating is laid down and validated in the “Handbook forensic investigation of explosions and explosives”.

After the explosions at the fireworks company in Enschede on May, 13th this response team immediately assisted the local police with the technical investigation of the scene of crime. The main tasks for the Netherlands Forensic Institute were co-ordination, quality assurance and counselling during the entire forensic investigation.

KEY WORDS: SFOB; Netherlands Forensic Institute; Handbook; Scene of crime; Quality control; Firework incident.

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The abbreviation SFOB is Dutch and means, in English, Co-operation in Forensic Investigation of Explosions. An official existing team of experienced technical investigators, specialised in the investigation of scene of crimes from explosions. In this way the expertise of technical explosion investigation at the scene of crime is concentrated. Updating the expertise of this team is done by practical and theoretical training, two or three times a year. This team is there for the assistance of the local police and available throughout the whole country.

In the SFOB participates:

- Specialised scene of crime officers. An advantage of this scene of crime officers is their daily job for all kinds of technical investigation at local police forces. In this way they have a broad knowledge of technical investigation in combination with a specialisation in explosion investigation.
- The Netherlands Forensic Institute for quality assurance, counselling and scientific co-ordination.

- The Central Criminal Intelligence Service for national and international exchange of information
- The Explosive Ordnance Disposal. They are not actually involved in the investigations but participate in relation to safety inspections, transport of explosives and their knowledge of military explosives.

With that in mind I will start the presentation of the handling of the scene of crime investigation at the firework incident in Enschede.

Fig. 1. The firework storage before the incident (photo PLD, June 15, 1999).

A fire started in a working space, next to concrete storage boxes (A). The fire department just started extinguishing the fire. Suddenly, on the back side, the containers (B) started to burn and partly exploded, later followed by the explosion of the garage boxes (C) and the concrete storage boxes (D). The last two explosions were very violently. Nineteen people were killed, three missing and over 900 injured.

The SFOB started the investigation as follows:

- two days of orientation/observation at the scene of crime;
- collection of information from local police;
- hearing involved fire brigade personnel;

Fig. 2. The firework storage after the incident (photo police Twente).

- reading licenses at the department of Environment from the city Enschede;
- making an investigation strategy.

For this investigation we had available:

- SFOB – 13 persons;
- local police for co-ordination – 2 persons;
- assistance from not SFOB certified scene of crime officers – 16 persons.

After the impressions of the scene of crime the aims of investigation have been officially written down and signed by the prosecutor. According to this aims we made an investigation strategy which involved:

- the use of a technical crime scene manager;
- forensic co-ordination, quality assurance and counselling by Forensic Institute;

- sampling by Forensic Institute;
- the use of an exhibits-handling officer;
- documentation of actions;
- having a rendez-vous point near the scene of crime;
- co-operation with rescue teams and labour inspection.

Some topics for reaching the aims of the investigation were:

- the use of sectors;
- localisation of the original containers, garage boxes and concrete boxes;
- impressions of the remains and damage outside the company boarders. It was not possible to place the scene of crime boarders around the total damaged residential area. As quick as possible scene of crime officers made an inventarisation of the damage and the remains of the company outside the scene of crime;
- assistance of an arson dog. Used for the possibility that somebody has made fire with flammable liquid;
- information about the original constructions. With information of the original construction we tried to analyse the damage;
- information about the storage of firework. How much, which kind and in which way was firework stored in the buildings and the containers;
- search for hinges and locks. In case of a possible burglary;
- only one entrance to the scene of crime was available. Boarders were made with fences and black plastic foil.

The handling of exhibits was done by the exhibits officer, he handled about 900 exhibits and that means packaging, sealing, documentation and controllable storage.

After three and a half week the investigation at the scene of crime was finished. Of course the exhibits needed further investigation at our laboratory. Important part in this further investigation was and is the co-ordination and/or adjustment of the investigations at different sections in our laboratory (Institute), the quality assurance and the counselling to the prosecutor, the tactical investigation team and other institutes.

Shortly after the closing of the scene of crime the SFOB team and the local scene of crime officers met again for an evaluation of the investigation.

It was pointed out that:

- The crime scene manager must keep overview. Very difficult at such large scene of crimes.
- Not more than one photographer must be used. This has to deal with archiving all the pictures in the investigation team, including the negatives.
- The scene of crime must be protected well. It is very difficult to keep people away from a large scene of crime.

- Records must be kept in a standardised way. Perhaps the use of more checklists could be useful.
- A contact person from local police is important. Evaluated as very positive. A scene of crime officer from the local police force was permanently available for everything that was needed. The fact that he knows the local organisation and has authority was very valuable for the continuation of the investigation.
- The “Handbook forensic investigation explosions and explosives” in relation to the European crime scene manual was an important validation tool. It shows the quality and validation of the way the investigation was done. Especially to the prosecutor, lawyers and the political commission which is controlling the whole handling of the incident.

Fig. 3. “Handbook forensic investigation explosions and explosives”.

Fig. 4. European crime scene manual.