

# LETHAL CONFINES: SEARCHING FOR SILENT KILLERS IN A PRISON

*By Captain Darrin Haas*

**Editor's Note:** *The following paragraphs describe one of the many scenarios that the 45th Civil Support Team (a unit of the Tennessee Army National Guard, Smyrna, Tennessee) enacted for a March 2010 training event.*

*It was dark and cold when two members of the 45th Civil Support Team first stepped onto Death Row in the Tennessee State Prison.<sup>1</sup> The only light in the cell block originated from the flashlight that each Soldier held as he searched from cell to cell.*

*Sergeant Stephen Evans and Sergeant Wesley Groves, the two survey team members, swiftly searched the cell block, looking for evidence of what had caused prison inmates to become deathly ill earlier that day. They found the items they were looking for on an inmate's desk: chemical and biological books, an eyedropper containing a clear liquid, and a shank. Based on evidence collected earlier, the Soldiers suspected that the liquid in the eyedropper was botulin—a nerve toxin that, when ingested, can quickly lead to paralysis and death.*



*Wearing full protective gear (including re-breathers, masks, and Level A containment suits<sup>2</sup>), the Soldiers carefully documented the location of the eye dropper and collected a sample of the liquid. But just as they finished, a call came over their radios: “Abort!” A violent inmate was unaccounted for and roaming free throughout the prison.*

*Following protocol, the pair gathered their tools and raced back to the decontamination area—not an easy task to perform while wearing an airtight suit, carrying 65 pounds of gear, and operating in an environment that contained potentially deadly microscopic toxins. The Soldiers would be easy prey for someone who had nothing to lose.*

The training event was organized and evaluated by U.S. Army North—an agency responsible for homeland defense and defense support of civil authorities. The exercises are designed to be as realistic as possible, and the 45th is evaluated every 18 months.

“Realism is the key to success,” said Captain Jason Stockton, the survey section commander. “All training has to be done as realistic as possible, because when on an actual mission and you are working with chemical or biological agents, there is no room for error.” This same philosophy was evident throughout all phases of the exercise.

“We did not know when or where the event would take place,” said Sergeant David Owen, a survey team member. “I was alerted a little after midnight on the 9th, and we had less than an hour to be back at our armory, prepared to deploy anywhere for anything. After reporting in, we were briefed on our mission. For this incident, we were informed that 150 inmates were eating dinner in the auditorium at the Tennessee State Prison in Nashville when an inmate threw containers filled with [simulated] chemicals producing chlorine gas into the crowd, possibly gang-related. There were also reports of inmates getting deathly ill, vomiting, and having high fevers. Some suspected poison in the food.”

Because the scenario took place at a “working prison,” the 45th was required to operate as if there were inmates present in the facility. This made the mission particularly challenging; but by 2 a.m., the 22-person survey team had begun using support equipment to conduct complex operations at the prison.

Survey team members investigated the prison cell blocks, working areas, and auditorium. Any evidence that was found was documented, photographed and, if appropriate, sampled. The entire area was treated as a crime scene.

When the Soldiers left the contaminated area, they and their equipment were completely decontaminated. The team physician, who specializes in chemical and biological response, was available to address any medical problems. Samples were transported to the 45th Civil Support Team mobile laboratory.

With the successful completion of this evaluation, the 45th has been recertified and is now ready to be called out on the next real-world mission. According to Sergeant Owen, the experience of working inside the old Tennessee State Prison has helped the Soldiers of the 45th to “think outside the box” when it comes to real-world missions. “You never know where you can be called to or what you will be doing,” he said. 

**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>The Tennessee State Prison, which has been closed since 1992, also served as the filming location for several movies, including *The Green Mile* and *The Last Castle*.

<sup>2</sup>Occupational Safety and Health Administration Level A personal protective equipment includes a positive-pressure, full facepiece, self-contained breathing apparatus or positive-pressure, supplied-air respirator with escape self-contained breathing apparatus; totally encapsulating chemical-protective suit; coveralls; long underwear; outer, chemical-resistant gloves; inner, chemical-resistant gloves; chemical-resistant boots with steel toe and shank; hard hat; and disposable protective suit, gloves, and boots.

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