



Y-12 security barely avoided 'friendly fire,' oversight group says

Pg. A1, October 23, 2004

By Frank Munger

More questions have surfaced about Oak Ridge security operations, even as the government's contractor struggles to put previous troubles to rest.

A watchdog group claims that guards at the Y-12 nuclear weapons plant nearly fired on an unarmed security team during a Sept. 1 training exercise.

The Project On Government Oversight said "friendly fire" was averted just seconds before a tragedy would have occurred. The group said the incident "underscores growing concerns" about the Oak Ridge contractor, Wackenhut, which manages security at Y-12 and other U.S. nuclear facilities.

Wackenhut officials said POGO's information about the security exercise is false. They said they learned of the allegations in an anonymous letter weeks ago and investigated the matter fully.

Jean Burleson, the Oak Ridge general manager, acknowledged there were disruptions in the nighttime security exercise, but he said that was not particularly unusual. He said there was never a situation in which a "shadow force" nearly fired on security officers involved in the force-on-force training exercise -- as alleged by POGO.

"We categorically deny that occurred," Burleson said

A shadow force is an armed security team that's on standby to protect the nuclear plant in case a real emergency arises during anti-terrorist training.

POGO said confusion arose during the Sept. 1 drill and that some security officers at Y-12 believed a real, armed adversary was advancing on the plant. The watchdog group, a frequent critic of security at nuclear installations, said Y-12's shadow force was dispatched to take care of the intruders and was stopped only seconds before firing on the training participants.

"Despite the near miss, Wackenhut continued the exercise," POGO said. The group said security procedures were violated.

Burleson and Lee Brooks, Wackenhut's deputy general manager in Oak Ridge, said the company is investigating who distributed an anonymous letter about the Sept. 1 exercise because it contained some



sensitive information that should not be made public.

Peter Stockton, a security analyst with POGO, said he had heard of the anonymous letter, but he said it was not the source of his group's report on the Y-12 incident.

Wackenhut officials also disputed another report circulating that a security guard at a key post within Y-12 fell asleep on the job last week but was not punished. Burleson said he's almost certain that report is untrue.

Burleson and Brooks suggested people "with an axe to grind" may be spreading malicious rumors in an attempt to discredit the company and keep it from getting new security contracts in Oak Ridge.

Wackenhut has two contracts in Oak Ridge, one for security at Y-12 and another for the rest of the Department of Energy's Oak Ridge facilities. Both contracts are due to expire at the end of the year.

Burleson said the company is negotiating short-term extensions of the current contracts with DOE and the National Nuclear Security Administration, which runs Y-12. He said Wackenhut plans to compete for new contracts when they are put up for bids.

The NNSA's Oak Ridge office declined comment on the latest allegations against Wackenhut. DiAnn Fields, a spokeswoman for the agency, said, "At this time, NNSA Y-12 management will rely on Wackenhut management officials to respond to any media inquires on this subject."

Meanwhile, Wackenhut has completed its investigation of a Sept. 21 incident in which live ammo got mixed with inert bullets that are used for training purposes. A live bullet was fired during the classroom training, striking a nearby refrigerator.

Burleson said Wackenhut investigators were not able to determine exactly how the single round of live ammunition got mixed with the inert bullets, which are used to practice reload techniques. However, the contractor identified several possibilities and changed training procedures to prevent future mishaps, he said.

Wackenhut officials will share the "lessons learned" from the Sept. 21 incident at a semi-annual security conference to be held next week in Albuquerque, N.M., Burleson said.

All weapons training in Oak Ridge was suspended following that incident. Burleson said firearms work with live ammunition has resumed and other training activities probably will be restarted within a couple of weeks, he said.

There have been other Oak Ridge security issues during the past year. The Y-12 guard force reportedly performed poorly in a major security drill last December, and an Inspector General report released earlier this year said guards at the Oak Ridge plant had routinely cheated on security tests by having advance information on threat scenarios.