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## Security Drill at Weapons Plant Raises Safety Questions

By MATTHEW L. WALD

OAK RIDGE, Tenn., Dec. 16 — In the predawn hours of Sept. 2, at the plant that stores the nation's stockpile of highly enriched uranium, guards wearing body armor and carrying loaded submachine guns were dispatched to intercept a group of men who had apparently set off an intrusion alarm. But the target group turned out to be a second team of guards, who were conducting a mock attack with laser-tag equipment.

The armed guards, a "shadow force" maintained in reserve during such drills, rushed through the dark, ready, people involved said, to shoot at a group whom they believed were intruders.

Such a deployment is virtually unheard of, security experts said, and had it led to a shooting, the incident could have destroyed the ability to hold such drills, a crucial tool in determining if the plant is adequately defended. The plant, called Y-12, is owned by the Department of Energy but is defended by a contractor, Wackenhut.

"For two minutes, it was mass confusion," said one of the guards on duty that night. "People asked several times, 'Is this a drill?' Nobody would clarify."

He and another guard involved in the incident agreed to speak only on condition of anonymity, saying they had been threatened with firing if they spoke with outsiders about the incident.

The incident was not the only problem drill at the plant, which is part of the Oak Ridge complex, near Knoxville. In January, the inspector general of the Energy Department reported that during a similar laser-tag drill at the weapons plant in 2003, the team playing defense performed unexpectedly well. The reason, the inspector general said, was that the defenders appeared to have gotten advance knowledge of the attack plans, including which building would be attacked and whether a diversionary tactic would be used.

The results were "tainted and unreliable," the inspector general found.

The Energy Department official in charge of the site, William J. Brumley, and a Wackenhut official, Martin

Anderson, said neither problem was serious. Both said that no one was ever in danger in the Sept. 2 incident, although Mr. Anderson said that the confusion raised anxiety levels and that communications that night could have been "crisper."

Security here is not only a matter of keeping intruders out, Mr. Brumley said. Technicians still maintain nuclear warheads, and security is also a matter of making sure that nothing is smuggled out, he said.

The intruder threat is not limited to theft. A suicidal terrorist who gained access to the uranium here might be able to assemble it in a few minutes into a nuclear explosive, and detonate it on the spot, experts say.

Though Y-12 is a weapons plant, the drill incident may have implications for the civilian nuclear industry. Earlier this year the trade association that represents the power re-

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### *A close encounter between armed guards and unarmed mock intruders.*

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actor operators hired Wackenhut to help conduct similar "force-on-force" drills at the 63 nuclear power plant sites. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission approved the contract in the hope that Wackenhut would bring more expertise to the drills, which in the past have varied widely by site. Wackenhut provides security at about half the plants.

During security drills at Y-12, the plant is vulnerable because half the people on duty are carrying laser guns, not real weapons, and are distracted by the exercise.

A second guard involved in the Sept. 2 exercise said that from the chatter on the radio, the guards had concluded that "it was time to go fight." A third person involved that night, apparently either a guard or a supervisor, submitted an anonymous letter to the union safety officer calling the error that sent armed guards

out to chase unarmed colleagues "an almost fatal tragedy," because the guards could have seen the exercise players firing their laser-equipped guns, which are made from real guns, and would have shot them. As they had trained, the guards came at the site of the alarm from two directions, people on duty that night said.

Officials at Wackenhut and at the Energy Department acknowledge that while there was an error, there was little danger of a killing because the players were alerted to the problem quickly, when the dispatcher called a "code October," which meant that the players should halt the exercise immediately, and the members of the "attack" team decided to hide themselves inside a building to avoid their oncoming comrades. For reasons that are disputed by participants, it took much longer to alert the shadow force.

Outside security experts had a harsher assessment. Peter Stockton, who was a special assistant to the secretary of energy in the Clinton administration and is now with the Project on Government Oversight, a watchdog group in Washington, said: "When you introduce live ammo in one of these things, it can be a disaster. If somebody had come around the side of the building, chances are they would have been killed."

Mr. Stockton said he had observed about 75 such drills over the years and had never seen a shadow force sent to track people during a drill, although they are often dispatched because a mechanical alarm system has activated somewhere.

The two guards who agreed to speak about the Sept. 2 event said they heard the dispatcher say "armed suspects" over the radio link, but according to Wackenhut and Energy Department managers, the dispatcher said, "I have people in the area." The anonymous letter referred to four armed adversaries.

An official of the guard's union said investigators from the inspector general's office recently began questioning guards about their training, to determine whether Wackenhut had provided all the training that it told the government it had. Some guards say that their time for target shooting and for physical condition-

ing had been cut back; one said that the records the investigators showed him indicated he had had firearms drill time that he never had.

The inspector general's office said it would not comment, and a Wackenhut official said he was unaware of the investigation, although he said the government sometimes audited training records.

Drills and firearms training were suspended for a while in the fall, because two weeks after the September drill, guards who were supposed to be using blank rounds to practice discharging and reloading their weapons turned out to have at least one live bullet in their supply. Someone shot a live round through a wall and then through a refrigerator in the next room.

The Y-12 plant, which employs about 400 guards, who are referred to as guards but dress like commandos, is ringed with watchtowers that look like the control tower for a small airport, except that the glass is obviously heavier-duty, and fencing protects the tower from someone throwing a grenade up to the window level.

The 800-acre heart of Y-12 is surrounded by a two-and-a-half mile barrier of steel walls, fences, barbed wire, motion sensors and cameras, which enclose a jumble of rusting, decrepit buildings. Some of the buildings date from World War II, and workers there enriched uranium for the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima. The name Y-12, like those for many Manhattan Project factories, and the Manhattan Project itself, was selected to give no clue about its function.

Wackenhut's contract was due to expire on Dec. 31 but has been extended for three months while Energy Department officials decide whether it should be renewed for a few years, or re-bid, or whether the guard force should be integrated into the main contractor work force.

Mr. Brumley, the Y-12 site manager, said that merging the guards with the main work force might help with the job of controlling materials as they are moved around the plant. Employees pass through metal detectors on the way out as well as on the way in, and quantities of uranium as small as drill shavings must be accounted for, he said.