

# Terror drills expose Earle security flaws, secret papers reveal

Sunday, November 11, 2007

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The Earle Naval Weapons Station, a Monmouth County military base where munitions are loaded onto warships destined for the Persian Gulf, posted a mix of high and low marks during simulated terrorist attacks this summer, according to confidential base documents and individuals familiar with the tests.

During a series of surprise drills conducted July 17-19, guards allowed two vehicles laden with fake explosives into the base, information obtained by The Star-Ledger shows. Sailors and staff also did not respond properly after a fake weapon of mass destruction identified as either "chemical, nuclear, biological, radiological or explosive" was planted in an administration building, the papers revealed.

An overall review of one day's tests concluded that manpower levels were inadequate at some guard posts, while an evaluation of another day's drills found the base communications system failed to operate properly, according to the documents. Additionally, the analysis found there were too few protective vests and helmets for personnel.

Earle's staff received "excellent" or "outstanding" grades on five of the 12 tests. The base did well at stopping individuals with fake identifications at waterfront checkpoints, it successfully intercepted individuals who were taking video surveillance of the base and prevented boat and swimmer attacks on the loading pier area.

Capt. Gary Maynard, Earle's commander, said the base is secure and well-defended. The tests, he said, are deliberately exacting and evaluations are always "highly critical" in order to push sailors and other personnel to be at peak readiness. He described the July exercises as typical of periodic tests designed to foster learning and expose security holes that can be fixed.

"I'm comfortable that we're well-prepared and adequately staffed to support both our manpower and our systems' requirements here for security," said Maynard, who has headed Earle for more than a year.

The July results provide a rare glimpse of the military's efforts to evaluate security at Earle, which performs a vital mission in the war on terrorism but receives relatively scant attention in the flat reaches of central and northern Monmouth County. It is the Navy's largest weapons post in the Northeast -- a sprawling facility divided into two sections more than 13 times the size of Manhattan's Central Park.

Earle "has provided ammunition services to almost every class of vessel operated by the Navy and Coast Guard as well as commercially owned vessels from a multitude of nations," according to a U.S. Navy Web site. Such munitions would include torpedoes for submarines, shells for ships' cannons, missiles to be launched from battleships, and bombs for naval fighter planes.

## **NOT FIRST POOR RESULTS**

Little is publicly known about the overall state of readiness at Earle and the nation's other military bases, but the July tests are not the first time the Monmouth County facility has registered unsatisfactory results. An individual familiar with the base's operations said the July test was representative of drills over the previous year: Strength in some areas, weak performances in others.

The smuggling of explosives past gate guards in July mirrors the alleged terrorist plot earlier this year against nearby Fort Dix, which was thwarted by federal authorities. Federal agents said terrorists conspired to kill soldiers by sneaking explosives onto the base while posing as pizza deliverymen. An investigation showed base guards had been allowing delivery vehicle drivers they knew into the base without proper inspections.

Last year, the U.S. Government Accountability Office raised concerns about base security. It warned about the Army's use of many contract security guards on bases because of post-9/11 manpower shortages caused by active duty and reserve personnel deployed overseas. For example, GAO found "a general lack of oversight of the guard's training, as well as poor record keeping on the part of contractors and inconsistent training techniques."

While Earle uses contract guards in addition to sailors and civilian personnel to protect the installation, a spokesman there said he could not assess whether GAO's findings had any bearing on the naval base's security operations.

Capt. Maynard declined to discuss any specific problems uncovered by the July drills.

The July test involving gate guards was stopped after just five minutes and graded a "failure" when two vehicles containing improvised explosive devices (IEDs) passed through a main gate without being inspected, according to documents detailing the test results. A review found the device was "overlooked several times despite being in plain view."

The test involving the planting of a weapon of mass destruction identified as either a chemical, nuclear, biological, radiological or explosive device, was stopped after 17 minutes and graded "unsatisfactory."

## **BETTER RESPONSES**

Base staff, however, also posted grades of "good" -- a six on a scale of 10 -- and "satisfactory" -- a four out of 10 -- for their respective responses to an alarm at a munitions storage area and a report of a suspicious person at the facility. Sailors and other base staff also scored a six on a retest of the failed vehicle IED drill and a four on a separate IED vehicle exercise.

The tests were administered by Earle's own sailors, civilian personnel and contract staff, and are similar to other exercises conducted quarterly at the facility. When drills are complete they are reviewed by top base officials, which include the commander, top police and fire leadership, as well as contract staff supervisors. Though base officials were reluctant to talk about the July results, they have publicly discussed security and safety issues previously. In a September article in the Asbury Park Press, they touted the successful coordinated response by base and local community teams to a drill involving a fake chemical weapons attack by a truck on a munitions-laden train.

No quarterly internal tests have been held at Earle since July.

Base documents about the July tests were provided to The Star-Ledger by individuals familiar with the drills, who did so only on condition of anonymity because of concerns they would be targeted for retribution by the Navy for revealing security vulnerabilities.

Protecting Earle is a particularly complicated task because the base is split into two facilities -- an ammunition storage and staging area in Colts Neck comprising more than 11,000 acres, and the three-fingered dock in Leonardo that sprawls more than 2 miles into Sandy Hook Bay. The two sites are linked by a 15-mile road and adjacent railroad track, allowing munitions to move through the base and surrounding area by both truck and train.

Earle opened in December 1943 as World War II created the need for a regional depot to dispense ammunition to ships, and the facility expanded during the Cold War.

According to the individual familiar with Earle's earlier drills, guards failed to stop individuals who held false identifications, responded poorly when packages containing dangerous substances were smuggled into the base and also did not react properly to alarms at munitions storage areas. Also, the individual said, several naval boats used to help defend the loading pier have been beset by maintenance problems.

Asked about those troubles in a follow-up inquiry, Patrick Fisher, the Earle base spokesman, said Maynard stood by his answers in the interview.

"All appropriate security measures are in place at Naval Weapons Station Earle," added Fisher in an e-mail response he attributed to Maynard.

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