

Center for Officer Safety and Wellness

International Association of Chiefs of Police



Officer Safety Column: Explosive Materials and Officer Safety



One of the most dangerous challenges facing police officers today is responding to threats to homeland security—in particular, responding to threats dealing with explosives and explosive materials. As evidenced by the tragic events that took place this July in Aurora, Colorado, the threat is ever present. One resource that police officers can utilize prior to encountering critical incidents and hazards in the field is the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) National Center for Explosives Training and Research (NCETR) in Huntsville, Alabama.

The NCETR main facility is an 83,500-squarefoot conference, training, and research center that opened in October 2010. It is the home of the ATF's explosives operational programs, training, and research. The NCETR facilities and approximately 1,000 acres of explosives ranges make this center a unique resource in the fight against explosives-related violent crime and the government-wide counter-improvised explosives device (IED) effort. One of the primary missions of the NCETR is to reduce injuries to bomb technicians, explosives investigators, and first responders.

The NCETR manages all ATF canine training initiatives and operational responses, the ATF's certified explosives specialist (CES) program operations, the Explosives Technology Branch operations, and explosives enforcement officer (EEO) operational responses. It provides basic and advanced explosives training and research that leverages lessons learned and best practices to safeguard the public and reduce deaths and injuries from explosives-related crimes and accidents, and provides focused support to the ATF's core mission of investigating the criminal misuse of explosives and regulating the industry, aligning this support with the government-wide counter-IED effort. The NCETR develops, coordinates, conducts, and facilitates the delivery of basic and advanced training courses for ATF personnel, U.S. and international law enforcement partners, the U.S. military, and other federal agencies. The center's goals are to foster explosives-related expertise and to promote interagency partnerships.

The Explosives Enforcement and Training Division (EETD) of the NCETR oversees the ATF's explosives training and explosives enforcement programs and manages the CES program. The EETD supports the Advanced Explosives Disposal Training course. This mission-critical training provides investigators and bomb technicians with the hands-on experience and instruction to deal with the most dangerous challenges bomb technicians routinely face: explosives disposal. The Homemade Explosives (HME) course is a cutting-edge program designed to provide deploying military bomb technicians and local, state, and federal investigators with the skills to identify the hazards of mixed or partially mixed precursor chemicals, sample and identify suspected chemicals, collect evidence, document scenes, use remote methods of removing, and safely dispose of HME hazards. Post-blast investigation courses are tailored to investigators as well as to U.S. Department of State personnel and international customers, providing a baseline and standardization of evidence collection that benefit investigators. The EETD provides training for and oversees the policy for 236 CESs who are the ATF's principal explosives investigators and liaisons with federal, state, and local bomb technicians. The mission of EETD is twofold: To lead the whole of government in combating the criminal use of explosives and to reduce injury and death to explosives investigators and first responders.

The Explosives Technology Branch (ETB) of the NCETR provides technical and operational support to ATF field operations. This includes providing on-scene assistance, rendering device determinations, and giving expert testimony. The ETB also assists the ATF's regulatory mission in the classification of explosives and by providing technical support on matters involving explosives storage, importation, and manufacturing. The EEOs assigned to the ETB also support ATF explosives training and the International Affairs Office and conduct assessments for the U.S. Department of State's Antiterrorism Assistance Program.

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Further, the NCETR also manages the ATF National Canine Training and Operations Center (NCTOC) in Front Royal, Virginia, and trains explosives and accelerant detection canines for federal, state, local, and international law enforcement and fire investigation agencies. The ATF has trained approximately 731 explosives detection canines and approximately 157 accelerant detection canines since 1991. These ATF-certified canine and handler teams are located throughout the United States and in 21 countries. Through a partnership with the Joint IED Defeat Organization, the ATF has collaborated with the U.S. Department of Defense Military Working Dog predeployment course to train military working dogs on HME detection. This program has saved dozens of lives through the detection of HME placed by insurgents in areas of overseas military operations. The NCTOC also sponsors groundbreaking training to counter emerging threats such as those presented by suicide bombers.



Amid the threat of terrorism, police officers are confronted with homeland security issues and hometown security issues every day. The ATF NCETR can be used as a resource of explosives knowledge by law enforcement personnel if questions about explosives or explosive material arise or if assistance is needed. The NCETR facility in Huntsville, Alabama, can be contacted at 256-261-7500. After hours, NCETR personnel can be contacted through the ATF Headquarters Joint Support and Operations Center at 202-648-7777 or at 1-800-800-3855.

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