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News

Warren firefighters help FBI analyze explosives

Crews equipped with chemical analyzer for post 9/11 cases

Monday, December 28, 2009

By Mitch Hotts, Macomb Daily Staff Writer

When federal authorities called on Warren firefighters trained in special equipment to help investigate the attempted terrorist bombing of an airplane late Christmas, the first responders were ready.

FBI agents needed an independent analysis of a crystal powder used by a suspected terrorist on Northwest Airlines Flight 253 on Christmas and put a call into the Warren Fire Department.

"That's what we're trained for, to be ready to operate this equipment on a moment's notice, even on Christmas night," said fire Lt. David Frederick.

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab of Nigeria was charged over the weekend with attempting to destroy or wreck an aircraft and placing a destructive device in a plane, according to a federal criminal complaint

filed in U.S. District Court in Detroit.

The complaint states the suspect used a chemical to try to cause an explosion in the aircraft as the flight approached Detroit.

Passengers smelled an odor and some passengers saw the suspect's pant leg and the wall of the airplane on fire. The suspect, who had burns on his leg, was restrained by passengers.

Frederick is one of the Warren fire officers who have been trained to operate what's known as an Ahura detector, a handheld portable chemical agent device that can quickly identify unknown solids and liquids.

The Ahura uses a laser to pair a substance with an established library containing samples of thousands of chemicals until a match is found.

Frederick, a 21-year department veteran, drove to a hangar at Detroit Metro Airport in Romulus with the detector about 10 p.m. Friday to assist FBI forensic scientists and explosives experts in identifying the chemical the suspected terrorist was using to try to blow up the aircraft.

"They were pretty sure they knew what it was," Frederick said Sunday evening. "We simply provided confirmation. They had the material in a vial which we used our detector on and gave them confirmation."

Their preliminary analysis of a syringe allegedly used by the suspect showed it contained PETN, also known as pentaerythritol, according to the criminal complaint.

PETN is most commonly used as an explosive. It's the same material convicted shoe bomber Richard Reid used when he tried to destroy a trans-Atlantic flight in 2001 with explosives hidden in his shoes.

It wasn't immediately clear on Sunday why the FBI called the Warren Fire Department for the assist as several suburban Detroit fire agencies have the Ahura detector.

Warren, like other fire departments, purchased the equipment with Homeland Security grants in the months after 9/11 as the federal government worked to better equip local first responders for potential terrorist incidents.

As part of their responsibility for having the tool, the fire department must always have someone on duty with knowledge of its use.

The detector is part of Warren's hazardous materials team's array of equipment and tools.

"Some departments don't want to staff that type of responsibility," said Warren firefighter Jim Hill. "But we do. And even on Christmas Day, we have the ability to respond appropriately and take care of the problem."

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