

# Explosion threat is defused

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Workers clearing a vacant warehouse on the grounds of the former Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook Wednesday stumbled onto enough explosive materials to destroy the building and a sizeable chunk of the complex.

Between 55 and 75 one-ounce cans of picric acid, a five-gallon container of ether and assorted other substances were found in a concrete vault that had stood unopened for 15 years. According to authorities, if one can of the acid exploded it could have destroyed the two-story brick warehouse.

After a day-long operation, the materials were transported by the Police Department's bomb squad to its Bronx headquarters for analysis and destruction Wednesday night.

"It's like nitroglycerin. If they move it around, it explodes," said one firefighter of the acid.

Employees of the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office (SIDDSO) were clearing Building 61 on the complex when they attempted to open a 10-foot by 10-foot concrete vault.

The lock on the vault door was unworkable, so workers used welder's tools to force it open, said SIDDSO Director Robert Witkowsky.

Containers of picric acid — some of them 18 years old — were stacked one on top of another, with the ether and other volatile materials stored in various corners of the room, said Police Officer Nicholas Moreback, who with his partner Officer Richard Piscopo were the first police unit on the scene.

"This is a chemical that is probably one of the more dangerous," said Officer Peter Frenzel of the Queens Hazardous Materials Unit.

The acid, which authorities said is used during blood tests, is not explosive in its liquid form. The material becomes highly explosive when it crystalizes, however, which some of the picric acid in the vault had done, Frenzel said.

Ether is also highly explosive, and so posed a danger, authorities said.

"If it goes," said one official during the operation, "it's going to make the atom bomb look like nothing."

After clearing the building of its four employees, police established a command post in a building across a courtyard from the warehouse.

Under the direction of Capt. Arthur Fiordaliso and Fire Chief Frank Corcoran of the 10th Division in Brooklyn, emergency ser-

vice personnel cordoned off the area as firefighters searched the warehouse to make certain there were no other volatile materials inside. Lt. Daniel Grossane of the 122nd Precinct coordinated efforts from the New Dorp station-house.

Had the vault not been well ventilated, or had workers accidentally jostled some of the acid, the materials could have exploded, police said.

Bomb squad personnel loaded the material into a special metal truck and, with police escort, drove it to the Bronx. The material was not transported until after 8 p.m., however, because officials were worried about the possible tragedy that could have occurred if the materials exploded in the midst of heavy holiday traffic, Fiordaliso said.

Another cache of picric acid was found on the developmental center facility grounds four years ago.

The warehouse was being cleared Wednesday because it is being turned over to the College of Staten Island.



Police and firefighters stand near the building where the potentially explosive acid was found.

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