

Staten Island Adman

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 19, 1996

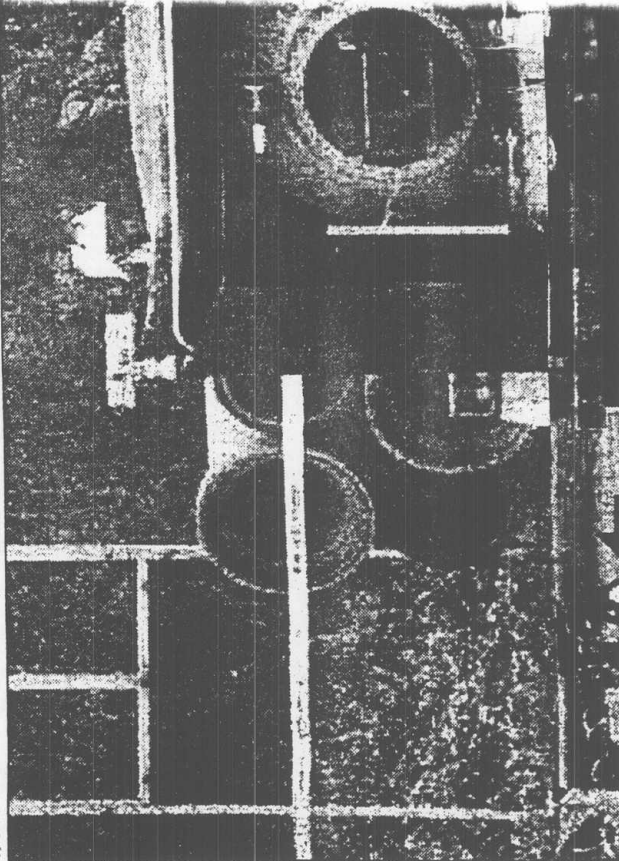
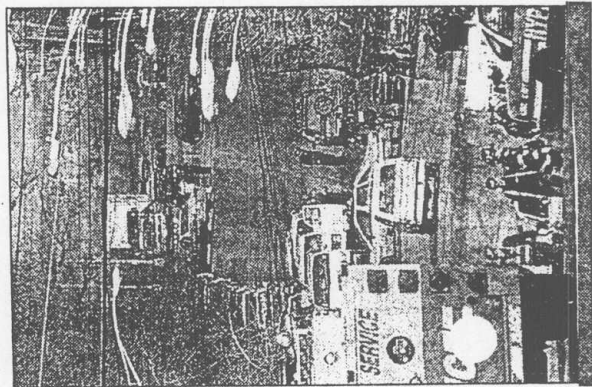
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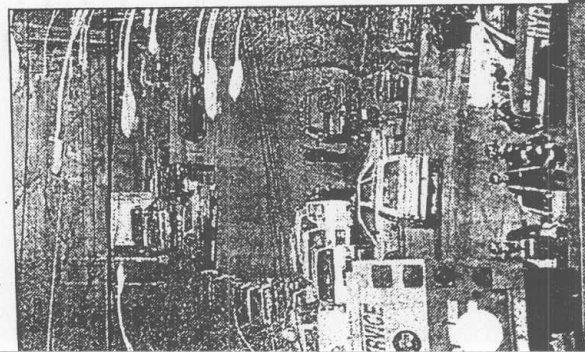
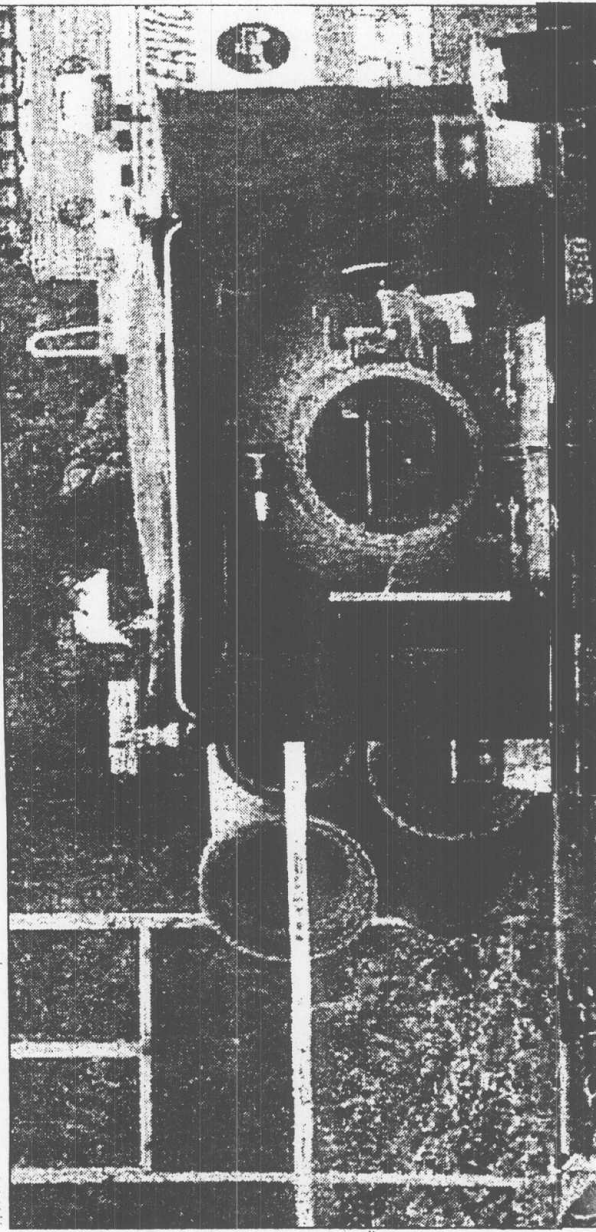
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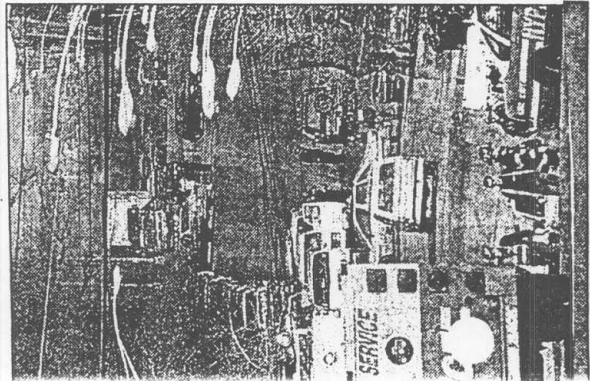
By PAUL MCPOLIN and CHARLIE GOULD
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No one has claimed responsibility for a "low-tech" bomb that forced the evacuation of 120 homes, an elementary school and a temple in Willowbrook yesterday, police said.

Explosives technicians examining the crude bomb said the device had "two clicks" left on its timer, and that a timer malfunction apparently kept it from detonating.

The device was about the size of a soda can. It was wrapped in heavy black tape, with wires connected to a white kitchen timer and a nine-volt battery. It was found at the corner of Willowbrook Road and Crafton Avenue, about a block away from Young Israel of Staten Island synagogue and adjacent to a little-used entrance to the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Organization (SIDDSO).

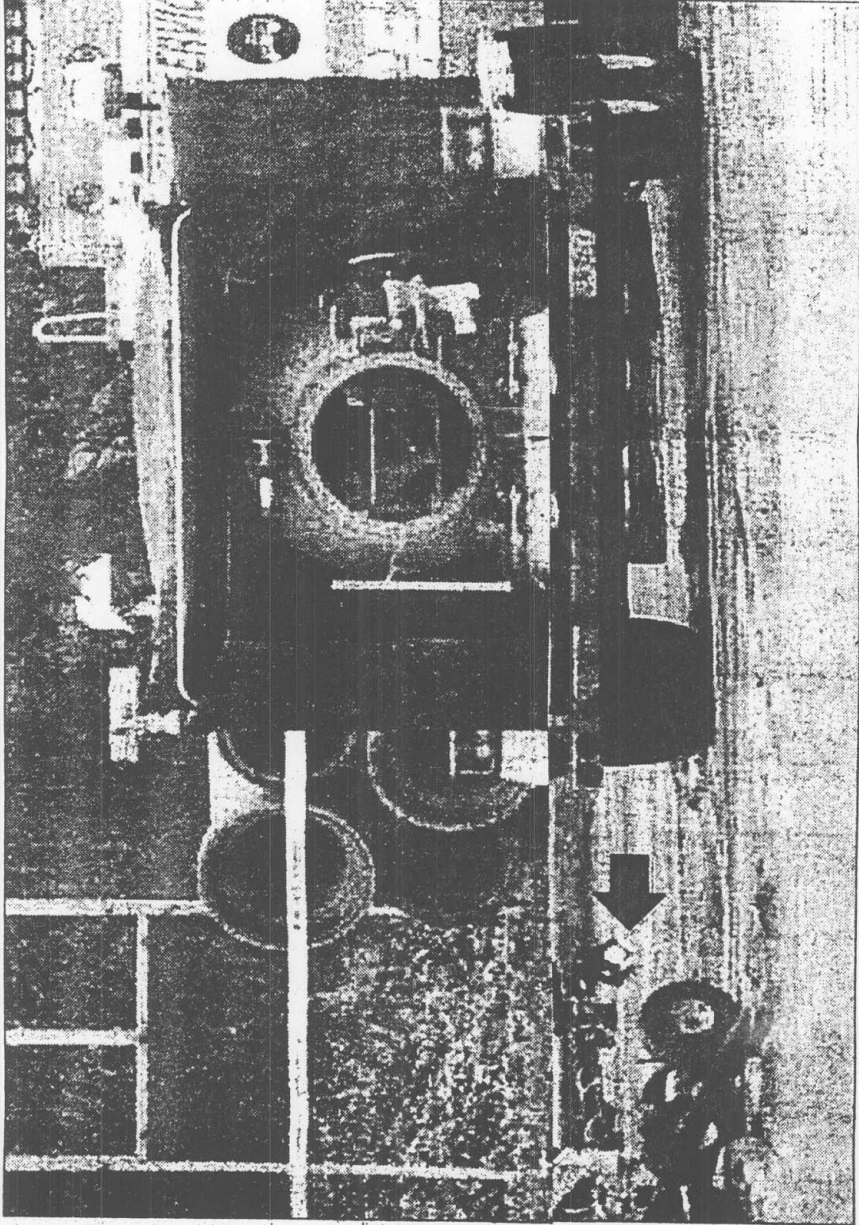
A construction worker found the bomb about six feet away from a high-pressure natural-gas pipeline buried three to four feet under-



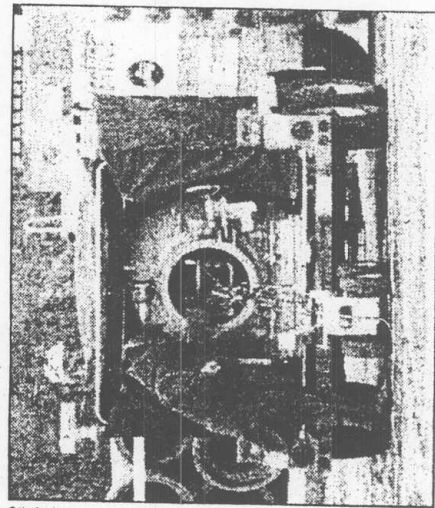
ADVANCE PHOTOS ■ ROB SOLLETT
Police close off Woolley Avenue near the site of the bomb.

"If the person knew what they were doing, they weren't looking to hurt anyone. It was very low-tech."

— Police Commissioner Howard Safir



A Bomb Squad robot, at left, carries a crude bomb the size of a soda can to a waiting container at Willowbrook Road and Woolley Avenue.



A member of the Bomb Squad secures the small bomb inside the container.



Police evacuate residents along Willowbrook Road and Crafton and Woolley avenues.

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Borough President Guy Molinari, left, Assistant Police Chief Eugene Devlin, right, and City Councilman John Fusco, at right background, hold a news conference at the scene where a bomb was found on a gas pipeline in Willowbrook.

ADVANCE PHOTO ■ FRANK J. JOHNS

Bomb

FROM PAGE 1

The Houston-based Transcontinental Gas Pipeline Co. operates the pipeline, which supplies Brooklyn Union Gas. The bomb was placed on the ground near a truck-sized steel frame used in trench work for a sewer installation project on Willowbrook Road.

At a police press briefing last night in Manhattan, Police Commissioner Howard Safir described the device as primitive, something out of "Basic Bomb 101."

He said detectives have a "number of leads" in the case. He refused to discuss a possible motive.

Police have no formal suspects, but told the Advance they are reviewing a bizarre Dec. 7 incident at the Young Israel temple. During the incident, an apparently deranged man disrupted the Saturday service, claiming he is God. According to witnesses and police, he also made references to possessing fertilizer, a bomb-making material, and to "blow-

Still, police took no chances.

From the time the device was discovered at 6:58 a.m., authorities regarded the object as a real bomb and worked to prevent a possible catastrophe.

Initially 40 homes on Willowbrook Road and Crafton and Woolley avenues were evacuated. A few hours later, police expanded the safety perimeter and evacuated another 80 homes, spilling scores of residents into the streets.

More than 900 students at PS 54 were ushered out of the Willowbrook Road school and bused to Susan Wagner High School for the day. Young Israel and the Elizabeth Connelly SIDDSO center were closed.

Police ordered emergency personnel and a growing crush of journalists in the area to refrain from using two-way radios, guarding against the threat of the device being activated by a radio signal.

About 75 cops, a dozen fire trucks and

able to shut the pipeline down.

The gas — which is not liquefied — is normally transported at up to 600 pounds per square inch, said Transcontinental spokesman Chris Stockton. After learning of the threat, officials bled the pressure down to 60 pounds per square inch before releasing the remaining gas into the air along an 8-mile-long section of pipe.

Stockton said the gas made a loud noise and had a foul odor as it was released, but that it posed no danger. He could not say how much gas was let go.

The company opened the pipeline again yesterday afternoon. The interruption had no effect on consumers.

The gas main runs across the Island from New Jersey to Brooklyn. It is considered a "lateral" pipe that branches out from a major gas line in New Jersey that originates in Texas, Stockton said.

Another pipeline several blocks away that carries jet fuel from

...to witnesses and police, he also made references to possessing fertilizer, a bomb-making material, and to "blowing things up."

Police Commissioner Howard Safir said investigators are "discounting" nothing, including a theory that a rival construction crew was responsible. Techno Contracting won the job, outbidding two other companies, said officials with the city Department for Design and Construction.

Safir said the bomb was too small to damage the pipeline or injure bystanders. It was described as about the equivalent of an M-80 firecracker.

"If the person knew what they were doing, they weren't looking to hurt anyone," Safir said. "It was very low-tech."

...device being activated by a radio signal.

About 75 cops, a dozen fire trucks, and several ambulances massed at the scene. Also on standby were federal agents with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) and members of the NYPD/FBI Joint Terrorist Task Force. Police investigators from Island detective squads, the NYPD's Major Case Squad and the Arson and Explosion Squads were on hand. At least two police helicopters circled above the scene.

At the center of the tense operation was the Bomb Squad, which dispatched robots and, finally, a heavily armored officer, to get an up-close view of the bomb.

Police waited to remove the bomb until Transcontinental was

originates in Texas, Stockton said. Another pipeline several blocks away that carries jet fuel from New Jersey through Staten Island to Kennedy Airport in Queens, was shut down as a precaution, according to the Pennsylvania company that operates it, Buckeye Pipe Line. Airport operations were not affected. Police originally reported the jet-fuel pipe was underneath the bomb.

Experts later said the bomb posed no threat to the buried 26-inch main, or a nearby six-inch gas pipe. Even if the explosion did rupture the pipe, the likely result would have been a towering geyser of flame, not a deadly eruption, experts said.

After the pipe was declared empty, at 12:23 p.m., robots and an officer made several trips to the package. It eventually was disarmed and loaded by a robot into the back of a containment truck. The truck is equipped with a hammock-like device that offsets any bouncing or jostling during a bomb's transport. It was taken to the Police Department's Rodman's Neck range in the Bronx.

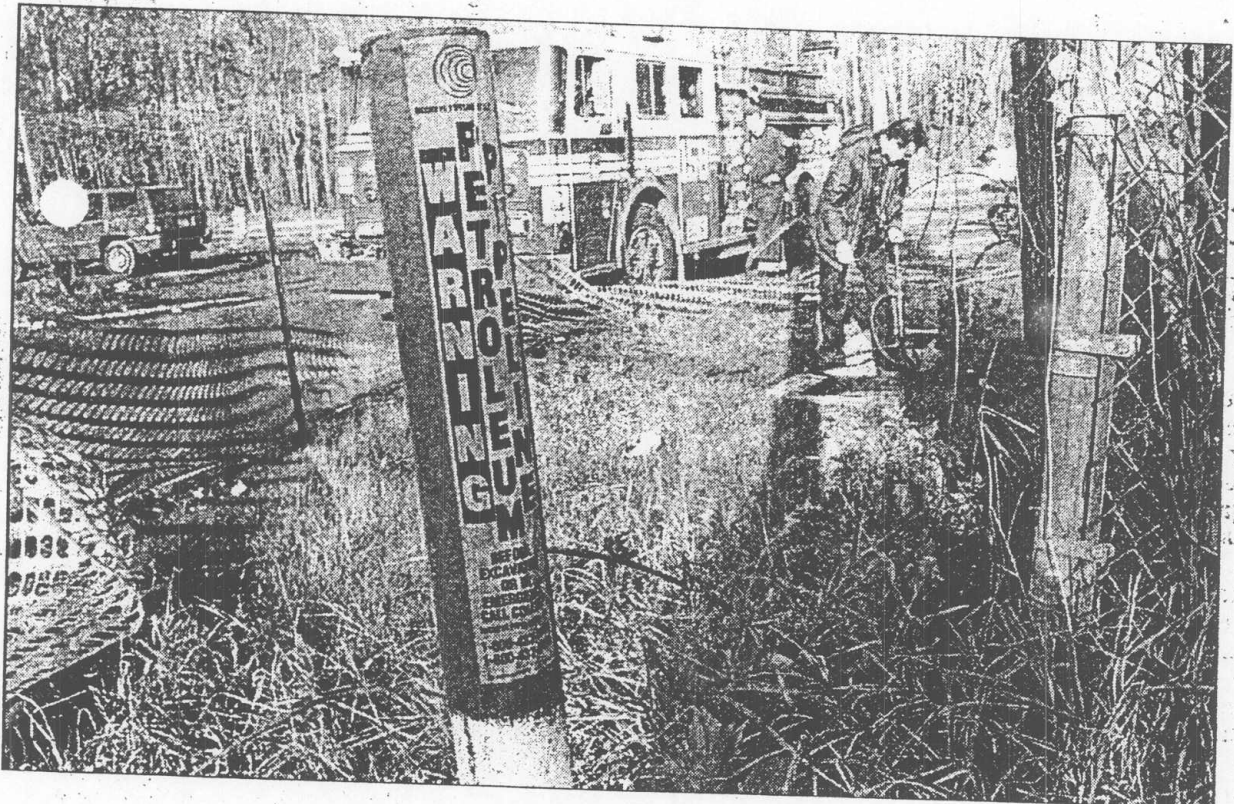
The device was found to contain a black powder, which police described as a weak explosive. It will be further analyzed by the Bomb Squad.

For seven hours, displaced residents — some in bare feet — milled about the perimeter. Some were enchanted by the novelty. They joked with reporters and some even videotaped and pho-



ADVANCE PHOTO ■ FRANK J. JOHNS

"We're Israelis so we know about bombs. But in Jerusalem, not here in New York," says Sarah Rotenstein, who was



Firefighters waited to remove the bomb until Transcontinental is able to shut the pipeline down. ADVANCE PHOTO ■ JAN SOMMA

tographed. TV reporters and politicians converged at the scene.

Many residents simply went about their business, going to jobs or holiday shopping. Others were frightened and worried, roused from sleep by police officers. Some were annoyed, and repeatedly pressed police to allow them access to their cars and homes.

"I came out in my slippers," said Melissa Kripaitis, a 20-year-old college student who lives on Willowbrook Road. "One of the neighbors gave me socks — I don't even know her."

"I was scared and I didn't even know what was going on," she said. "They said there was a package."

Sarah Rotenstein, also in slippers, said she was alarmed.

"We're Israelis so we know about bombs. But in Jerusalem, no one is in New York," she said.

A teacher, she said she had planned to spend the day marking 150 tests.

"My students are..."



A family evacuated from their home walk down Forest Hill Road towards Boone Street. ADVANCE PHOTO ■ ROB SOLLETT



planned to spend the day marking 150 tests.

"My students are happy," she joked.

Borough President Guy V. Molinari, who visited the scene with Councilman John Fusco (R-Mid-Island), said he was "deeply relieved" by the outcome and lauded the emergency coordination.

"We have houses nearby, children nearby, a temple nearby," he said.

The PS 54 students spent the day in the auditorium of Susan Wagner High School.

PS 54 Principal Paul Choset said he consulted with police and District Schools Superintendent Christy Cugini before making his final decision.

This is the second time in the last 10 years that PS 54 has been evacuated due to a potential gas explosion, Cugini said.

Members of PS 54's PTA and school staffers notified parents of yesterday's evacuation by telephone. Children were dismissed to legal guardians throughout the day.

Students who remained at school were entertained by members of a Wagner high school chorus for a good part of the morning, before being served lunch and starting in on silent reading assignments later in the day.

Afternoon dismissal took place from Susan Wagner, and the after-school Latchkey program was set up at the high school as well.



ADVANCE PHOTO ■ FRANK J. JOHNS

"I was scared and I didn't even know what was going on," says Melissa Kripaitis, who was told to leave her home.



ADVANCE PHOTO ■ ROB SOLLETT

More than 900 students at PS 54 were ushered out of the Willowbrook Road school and bused to Susan Wagner High School for the day. Young Israel and the Elizabeth Connelly SIDDSO center were closed.

According to Michael Tobin, principal of Susan Wagner, the high school's instructional day was not disrupted.

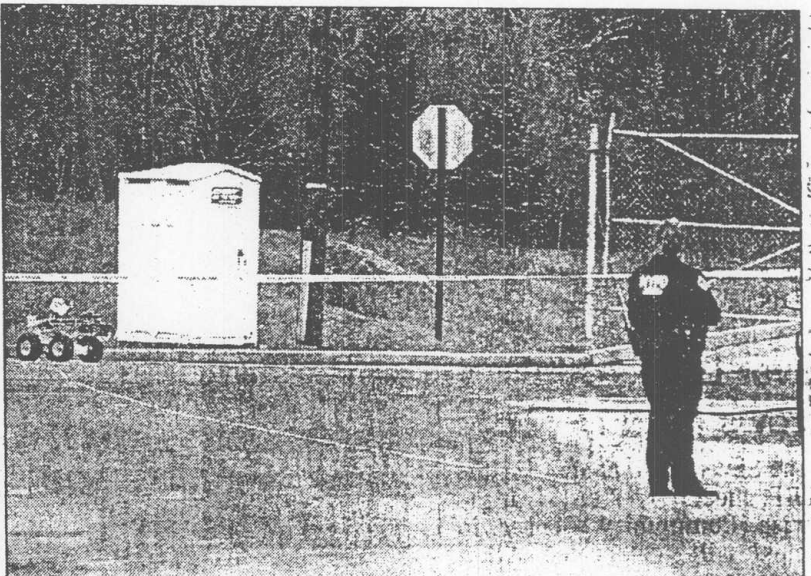
"Everything is going on as usual," he said. "This is not a major problem because we have the space."

Tobin reported that Susan Wagner High School received a phoned-in bomb threat from what sounded like a young man late yesterday morning. School safe-

ty officers and members of the school's staff searched the school and declared an all-clear within an hour. Students in the school were not affected.

"It's not unusual that under the circumstances some prankster might want to capitalize on the situation," Tobin said.

Advance staff writers Reginald Patrick and Marjorie Hack contributed to this report.



ADVANCE PHOTO ■ FRANK J. JOHNS

A robot, left, is dispatched to get an up-close view of a bomb placed on a pipeline.