



Training to Protect: Post-Blast Investigator Training on LAKE MURRAY

by Mary Ann Hutcheson

Locals know Lake Murray as a major recreational area. Covering an area of 78 square miles, the lake provides more than enough room for everyone's favorite water activities, e.g., water-skiing, boating, swimming, picnicking, bird watching.

The lake also offers some of the best fishing in the nation and is the home of abundant bird species, including the Great Blue Herons and migrating Purple Martins.

There is something else Lake Murray provides, of which many residents are unaware. It is the perfect place for law enforcement and FBI training exercises.

Part of their job is to provide counterterrorism support and protect the large amount of critical infrastructure located on South Carolina's coastline.

Special Agent Bomb Technician, Carl Cuneo, began his career with the FBI 22 years ago and was assigned to various field offices before moving back to South Carolina in 2011. It was during that time that Cuneo became involved with the Law Enforcement Maritime Community.

The Program

In 2016, a training program called the Underwater Post Blast Investigators Course was brought to our own Lake Murray site here in the Midlands. The FBI, in conjunction with the South Carolina State Law Enforcement Division (SLED), as well as the Lexington County Sheriff's Department, trains divers for evidence recovery in an underwater environment. The purpose of the course is to teach divers techniques on proper law enforcement evidence recovery in a maritime environment.

The training itself instructs certified public safety divers. That means divers from various law enforcement agencies around the country – whether it's FBI divers, Lexington County Sheriff's Department, or divers from public safety law enforcement agencies in

California or around the country.

"We run two courses a year around the United States – one of which is here in South Carolina; the other usually in California," Cuneo says. "It is somewhat of an exclusive skill in that there are not a lot of divers who attend this training. They offer it a couple of times a year to train people in these skills. This year was actually the fifth time in Lexington that they have done this training. It would have been the sixth year were it not for the arrival of COVID-19 in 2020."

Although the program started here in 2016, the FBI has been doing the training for many years. Cuneo says they actually begin their planning for the upcoming training exercise as early as April each year. Lake Murray provides a great training environment – it is also a great place to dive, offering the perfect environment for divers to train and work on skills without worrying about tides or wildlife or other dangerous features that a larger body of water, like coastal waters, would present. Divers can dive safely with little distraction from their focus skills. Cuneo says, "You have to be in a place, for example, where you can park your boats,



that provides training points where the divers can assemble and go into the water. You wouldn't want to conduct training in a pool, for example, which doesn't simulate the actual conditions of a natural body of water. You have to balance all those factors out."

Creating Realistic Scenarios

In law enforcement, evidence recovery is conducted all the time, separate from an explosion. That would include situations like

al area where the witness saw the explosion. Trainee divers know where they're supposed to go and begin their work.

To create additional realistic scenarios for the divers, a submerged boat, car, and a small Cessna (drained of all oil, and with the cooperation of and authorization from Dominion energy) are submerged in the lake. After class is over, the objects are retrieved and beached for use the following year.

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body recoveries, or recovering a fire arm that may have been thrown in the water to conceal. This class is specifically designed for evidence recovery after an explosion occurs.

The training focuses on specific situations like an explosion over water, where pieces of the explosive debris land in the water at the bottom of whatever body of water it might be. The diver's job is to go in and retrieve that debris.

There is an established process for detonation that is used in the training; nothing is detonated in Lake Murray. An improvised explosive device (IED, or bomb) is detonated beforehand in a safe location, and the debris collected. On the morning of the class, the instruction divers transfer those pieces to the bottom of the lake. One scenario might be the dive instructor telling a group of four or five divers that a bomb was exploded on a boat at a specific location, and a witness said he saw the explosion happen in that location. The instructor then indicates the gener-

Requirements and Training

Included in the course are classroom sessions where instructors teach improvised explosive devices (IED), what to look for after an IED blows up, and what kinds of pieces are left behind, so divers know exactly they are looking for. The debris includes a wide variety of different sized pieces, some very small. It depends on how powerful the explosion is and the composition of the material. Different devices have been detonated at each established point in the lake. After everything is collected, the students group together to study each device so they can become familiar with the different types of explosive devices.

The students, all law enforcement divers, want to be in the course. They are dedicated and interested. Those who travel across country to participate in the training wouldn't take a week off from their regular jobs and travel across the country if they weren't committed to mastering the skills involved in protecting our critical infrastructures, i.e., they definitely want to be there. Cuneo points out that getting into the class is competitive and is not offered on a frequent basis. In addition, there is a waiting list to get into the class.

Each class has 24 students; each team is assigned a boat. Two or three boats patrol the immediate area and ensure that pleasure boaters steer clear of that area. The training takes place on weekdays at the end of September, when school is back in session and the lake is less crowded.

Cuneo says, "People on the lake are very cooperative. Usually, they see a police boat with a flashing blue light and tend to





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keep their distance.”

The process requires a good bit of equipment and personnel to provide the training, which includes boats, dive instructors, and dive safety officers, as well as a way to refill the air tanks after every class each day. There is a lot of organization involved in putting on this kind of training.

The Lexington Sheriff's office has a full scope marine patrol with many boats and many good boat drivers who provide support. The group also receives support from SLED (South Carolina Law Enforcement Division), which provides several boats, as well as law enforcement boat drivers and boats that come in from around the state from places like Charleston. They also help during the week.

Support Makes the Difference

Cuneo says, “We would not be able to do this without the collection of agencies to assist us. SLED and the Lexington County Sheriff's Department are there to support us. Sheriff Koon has been a strong and dedicated supporter of this class from the beginning. There are a lot of resources from his office that go into this training. He is definitely a physical presence at the training itself and is a huge supporter every year. This is a limited law enforcement skill set. But in the event that we ever need it, it's really important.”

“Our training in this business is very important,” says Sheriff Koon. “It's not something you do every day, but something you prepare to do when you need it.”

That's why there's only two classes a year around the country. Many things have to come together to make these classes successful. There are wonderful lakes throughout South Carolina, but Lake Murray itself provides the best possible site for this operation. The FBI wouldn't be able to conduct this training by themselves. Cuneo is thankful to have people who are willing to support the training. “A lot has to occur from one end to the other to execute the training,” he says. If you have evidence in water, and you have to recover it, whatever the case might be, this training is definitely going to assist in that regard.”

We are most thankful for all the people and their agencies who work together to get the job done in this class. They include Mark Keel, chief of the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division (SLED), Sheriff Jay Koon, Lexington County Sheriff, Susan Ferrisic, FBI agent in charge of its Columbia Field Office, and Captain Adam Myrick, public information officer from the Lexington County Sheriff's Department. ■