



San Diego County Sheriff

Training Bulletin

William D. Gore, Sheriff

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Use of Radios/Cellphones at Bomb or Bomb Threat Calls

The use of radio systems and cell phones has long been discouraged at improvised explosive device scenes (IED) or bomb threats. The reasons for this were primarily due to the risk of stray radio frequency (RF) energy causing the unintentional functioning of a device. In the past, blasting cap design was more susceptible to accidental initiation. Furthermore, radio controlled IEDs (RCIED) utilized simplistic mechanical control devices, such as the device used in the 1996 La Paloma bombing. This device used a basic two way mechanical functioning transmitter and receiver.



Advances in technology have caused us to take a second look at this practice. At a large scene such as a bombing, suspect IED, bomb threat or active shooter lack of communications can be detrimental to safe and orderly operations. Critical resources can be delayed or misdirected without effective communication. These incidents often occur at large complexes, such as schools or office buildings. Coordinating with other units via radio while evacuating or evaluating the situation is crucial. The use of a smartphone to view an overhead GPS image of the location can assist with staging resources or choosing an evacuation area. Without these tools the evacuation process is extended and cumbersome.



Almost every citizen carries a cell phone of some type. Prior to your arrival at a scene, hundreds of cell phone calls will likely be made in the area. A device sensitive to stray RF function would have most likely been unintentionally triggered well before law enforcement and other first responders arrive.

With these factors in mind, the San Diego Sheriff's Bomb/Arson Unit now recommends the following protocols regarding RF transmitting devices at IED/Military Ordnance/Bomb Threat/Suspicious Package calls:

Access the situation; what are your immediate threats, is this an active shooter call, has a device been located, were there specific threats made, has there been similar incidents recently, is this a

military ordnance call, is the device your only potential threat...the list goes on. The bottom line is the safety of you, your partners and the public.

During a free flowing active situation, communication is critical. You must use your radio to coordinate the arrival of your resources. You turning off your radio would be far more dangerous than almost any transmissions you would make on your radio or cellphone. Our radios currently transmit 3 watts of power. The recommended safe distance from a commercial detonator is 5 to 14 feet at 3 watts of power. The chances of your radio or cellphone triggering a device are extremely remote, almost non-existent. Don't transmit standing over any suspected device.

During a static situation where your only threat is the device, based on your best judgment, you are going to approach the suspicious package, device, military ordnance, etc. to make your initial evaluation, turn off your radio. Make sure you have a partner on the perimeter that can keep their eyes on you and be ready to make any necessary radio transmissions or update you with new information.

Cellphones – your cellphone can be a great tool. Like your radio, the transmit power is 3 watts or less for most phones. Based on the current situation, you make the decision to approach a located device or suspicious package; you can put your phone in airplane mode and take a few pictures. Don't spend any more time than necessary, remember time, distance and shielding. Don't feel like you have to take pictures for Bomb/Arson personnel. Never approach a device or package that has been deemed suspicious and a request for Bomb/Arson has or will be made.

Does the benefit of using your radio/cellphone, out way the risk of the extremely slight possibility of unintentionally triggering a device?

The information in this Training Bulletin was provided by the Bomb/Arson Unit and edited for distribution by Cpl. Brent Longfellow at the In-Service Training Unit. If you have expertise in a particular subject and would like to write a training bulletin, please contact Corporal Brent Longfellow at In-Service Training, [REDACTED]