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Hazmat Hijacks: The Threat is Real

By Jennifer Hawks

Trucks hauling hazardous materials have long been vulnerable to hijackings by terrorists. But in the five years since 9/11, government officials and the news media have focused more on airline security than international or domestic hazmat truck shipments, putting the safety of our ports, trucking networks and inland cities on the back burner. Of course, placing an extra expense and tighter controls on an already-stretched-thin industry may seem like a bad idea to truckers, especially when nail polish is wastefully classified as dangerous, but the threat of terrorism through hazmat hijacking is real. And that means it shouldn't be overlooked for any reason.

Recently, the Transportation and Security Administration (TSA), under the control of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, enacted an interim solution to increase border security and lessen the risk of hazardous materials falling into the wrong hands, or at least, the wrong drivers. As part of the Free and Secure Trade (FAST) accreditation program, background checks are now required of all commercial drivers licensed in Canada and Mexico who haul hazmat loads into the United States . Though it may work

to ensure that the drivers themselves are not a threat, the FAST program does not prevent terrorists from hijacking hazmat shipments.

However, announcing the program to the media should have shed some much needed attention on the threat of U.S. ground terrorism. But, on August 10, the same day that the FAST background check requirement for international drivers came into affect, Great Britain revealed that it had intercepted a terrorist plot to bomb several commercial airliners. U.S. government officials and the media shifted their attention to airline security. Even more recently, a serious threat occurred within our own borders at a port in Washington State , but was not given nearly the same level of attention as the events overseas. A suspicious cargo container at the Port of Seattle led to an evacuation of the area, bomb-sniffing dogs, and howls from some members of Congress that our government must improve coastal security immediately, but their voices were muffled by talks of airplane terrorism. How long will it be until improving security for hazmat shipments becomes a priority? One has to wonder if it will require a catastrophic event.

Terrorists and Trucks

Tracking systems that use GPS can monitor the location of hazmat trucks virtually anywhere in North America , but just knowing the location isn't enough. A hijacking scenario can take place in less than ten minutes. Imagine this scenario: Terrorists take a truck carrying hazardous materials. They ram it full speed into a building. The truck's contents explode. Massive casualties result. Dispatchers monitored the truck's location every step of the way, but had no idea what was happening. Perhaps most chilling of all, even if they had known, it is uncertain if they could have stopped the truck in time. Far fetched? Hardly. Terrorists have a long history of using loaded trucks as WMD shotguns. Here's a partial rundown:

—Beirut, Lebanon, April 18, 1983. Suicide terrorists slammed a truck full of explosives into the US Embassy, killing sixty-three people. In October of the same year, they struck again. This time their truck bomb collapsed the US Marine barracks at Beirut Airport . Total casualties: 241 people dead.

—New York City, February 26, 1993. Terrorists drove a bomb-filled van into the garage

of the World Trade Center . Casualties: six people dead, more than 1,000 injured.

—Oklahoma, City, April 19, 1995. Timothy McVeigh, considered by many to be a domestic terrorist, drives a truck filled with a homemade bomb into downtown Oklahoma City . The bomb's explosion is enough to destroy the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building . Casualties: 168 dead, more than 500 injured.

—Nairobi, Kenya , and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania , August 7, 1998. In separate but simultaneous attacks, terrorists drive bomb-filled trucks into both cities' U.S. Embassies. Casualties: 224 dead, more than 5,000 injured.

Terrorists can build their own truck bombs, or they can hijack a ready-made truck bomb full of hazardous materials, much as they have used airplanes as instant weapons. Identifying hazmat vehicles is as easy as reading the placards posted on the trucks. Removing the placards would possibly eliminate some of the risk, but to safely and effectively control spills, emergency crews need to know what they're dealing with. More than likely, placards will always identify shipments of hazardous materials.

Who's Keeping Watch?

The Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) estimates that trucks haul more than 800,000 hazmat shipments throughout the United States every day, but doesn't know the exact number. Nor does Homeland Security. And if hazmat loads are not all tracked with ultimate precision, how can all those shipments be protected from terrorists?

A problem in tracking them is in understanding which government agencies are responsible for what. Protecting the public from hazardous materials is complicated, even to these agencies themselves. The acronyms read like a jumbled bowl of alphabet soup, and there are so many levels and sublevels within the government departments, starting with the Department of Transportation (DOT) and the Department of Homeland Security, that lines of responsibility easily get blurred. PHMSA is a department within DOT responsible for ensuring the safe and secure movement of all hazmat shipments by all modes of transportation. They ensure that companies and individuals shipping

hazardous materials are in compliance with Hazardous Materials Regulations (HMR), which were created by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), which operates under the control of Homeland Security. This includes proper labeling and packaging. PHMSA, in other words, is mainly concerned with minimizing the risk of accidental spills and providing information for first responders. It's not exactly high-level security.

The largest ground security effort of the TSA in recent years was in May 2003 when it published a rule that requires any hazmat driver in the U.S. who applies for a HME to first complete the hazmat driver threat assessment program. If the driver does not complete it, then the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) prohibits states from issuing an HME to that driver. This covers American commercially licensed hazmat drivers, but not drivers from Canada or Mexico until just recently. That's why this year the Canadian Border Patrol and the TSA began requiring hazmat drivers from Canada and Mexico to complete FAST background checks in order to obtain a HME. But these requirements only provide superficial protection by preventing potential terrorists from legally getting behind the wheel of a truck loaded with hazardous materials. But if a terrorist simply wanted to hijack a hazmat shipment, at this point, there's not much FAST can do to stop them.

Since 9/11, the Bush Administration has promised the American public that the government will protect citizens from future terrorist attacks. But what about focusing on protecting internal systems in addition to just preventing attacks from outside our borders and in foreign countries? Shortly after the failed bombing plot of August 10, Arkansas Senator Mark Pryor addressed the issue of terrorism during the weekly Democratic Radio Address. "My fellow Democrats and I believe our government must do more to protect Americans at home and around the world. We also understand there is no time to waste. Five years after 9/11, our country is not as safe as it needs to be, or should be. More needs to be done."

Recently, the President acknowledged that no system can be 100 percent perfect against

terrorists. Perhaps that's true. But have they done enough to protect us from within the country, meaning our vital ground transportation system? Maybe not very much so far, but there are future improvements on the rise.

Security Pilot Program

In August 2005, Homeland Security started new wheels turning by authorizing the TSA to develop the Hazmat Truck Security Pilot Program as part of the threat assessment program. The program is still in its initial stages, one of the main objectives being to develop a system that will track every hazmat truck in the country in real time. Eventually centralized tracking center will monitor those vehicles and coordinate all threat responses.

One of the companies that Homeland Security contracted to piece together this system is General Dynamics Advanced Information Systems. They in turn approached Safefreight Technology, a company that specializes in tracking cargo trucks using GPS and cellular technology. In February of this year, an incomplete prototype was field tested and shown to work. The primary value of the finished system will be the ability to disable the truck in the event of a hijacking.

“Obviously, if you have a big semi running down the interstate,” explains Jim Balestra, Chief Operating Officer of Safefreight Technology, “You don't want to shut down the engine. So, immobilization techniques can vary. For instance, an engine will only start up at designated times, or if an idling truck is hijacked, then as the bad guys are heading out, the vehicle can be gradually slowed down. At the same time, authorities can be alerted.” Additional proactive measures can be taken. “In the real world, there are other things that can occur while hauling hazmat. Someone might open up the tanker and introduce some sort of foreign substance. Having an ambient light sensor can tell you the door opened, where and when. Volume metrics—a sensor that will let you know there's been a change in the amount of liquid substance.” Using both digital and analog sensors, the hardware control device can provide a wide range of information.

Though this technology already exists, a nationwide system has yet to be implemented or even fully planned. Assuming the system is eventually put into place, trucking companies would have to purchase individual units and pay monthly service fees for each vehicle. When and if the TSA makes compliance mandatory, it's certain to affect the companies' bottom line. The larger issue at hand is whether a centralized tracking center can effectively handle the overwhelming number of hazmat shipments that pass through the country every day, thus potentially rendering the system useless. And a common concern at this stage in the game is the number of potential false alarms that could add to the confusion and workload.

Whether or not FAST or the Pilot Program are going to provide security solutions, one thing is certain—more needs to be done to protect the trucking industry from attacks. It should be as high a priority as other Homeland Security issues. Do your part supporting protective measures on ground transit.
