

**PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT CASE STUDY --  
THE PUBLIC, THE MEDIA, AND CHEMICAL WEAPONS IN THE FRONT YARD:  
SPRING VALLEY, WASHINGTON, D.C. (1993)**

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**Introduction**

On January 5, 1993, a worker digging a utility trench in an upscale Washington neighborhood uncovered some World War I chemical munitions. Once emergency officials heard the words "poison gas" and "munitions," District of Columbia emergency equipment and workers streamed into the neighborhood. Reporters descended on the site. Soldiers in chemical suits arrived. Residents were evacuated. With the onslaught of flashing police lights, uniformed soldiers, and omnipresent news cameras, local homeowners began to panic.

This one site had all the attributes of a great news story: disaster, panic, conflict, danger, and big government. But you didn't see this story played out nightly on CNN. In fact, it wasn't picked up as a major, controversial story. That's because of the excellent work by those removing the munitions and a strong public involvement program. These turned a potential public relations disaster and media nightmare into a success story. Public involvement changed angry, frightened citizens into firm believers in the project. It turned cynical media into informed news outlets. And it made the munitions removal effort easier.

Spring Valley is a beautiful Northwest Washington neighborhood of million-dollar homes. During World War I, it was part of Camp American University, the birthplace of chemical weapons development in the United States.

When the Army vacated the land in the 1920s, some of those chemical munitions were left buried. Decades later, the Army's month-long emergency response action uncovered 141 pieces of ordnance. Of those, 97 were high-explosive artillery rounds, with 44 believed to contain chemical agent. Phase I of Operation Safe Removal was a success.

Much of the praise for the success belongs to the soldiers and civilians from the Technical Escort Unit, who daily put themselves in harm's way to remove these dangerous munitions. Many other organizations also were involved. The focus of this paper, however, is on the public relations battle.

# Report Documentation Page

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## **The first two, silent days**

Immediately after the Army was called in, attention was naturally focused on the emergency. There was no coordinated public involvement activity. In fact, the Army canceled its first announced news conference. This left residents in the dark and puzzled news reporters. As one, Gary Nurnberg, said in his Jan. 6 broadcast: "We do not know if the military first of all knows what it has on its hands. Secondly, if its ever going to let (us) know what it is. All we do know (he said, with a disbelieving look), is we're getting military assurance that they're taking care of it."

On January 7, we began a coordinated public involvement program. We saw immediate results. By the time we finished the emergency response, the Army's Chief of Staff, Gen. Gordon Sullivan, would note that Operation Safe Removal was as much a public relations battle as it was a military operation.

## **Steps to improving relations**

We realized that the first step of any public involvement program is knowing your audience. We found we had four primary audiences, and had a different message for each audience.

-- Evacuees. Our message to them was, we're going to work safely and as quickly as possible so you can return safely to your homes. Our evacuees, by the way, included Senators, diplomats, lawyers, and a future Secretary of the Army.

-- Media. We have a good idea what we're dealing with. We know what we're doing and will remove this material as quickly and safely as possible. We want to keep the public informed. We had some contact with national media like NBC and the New York Times, but most reporters were from local papers and stations.

-- D.C. Government. Same message as media, plus we want to work closely with you to take care of your constituents.

-- The public at large. Don't panic, we know what we're doing, we're working safely, and we have the situation in hand. This is an isolated problem and will not affect the public at large.

The second step, of course, was putting Public Affairs assets in place. After I got there on January 7, the Military District of Washington Public Affairs Officer and I were handling the media and the public. When the Army established a Service Response Force -- or emergency response force -- the Chemical and Biological Defense Agency brought a cell of four Public Affairs Specialists to the site. I worked with them, serving as the Corps of Engineers "technical" Public Affairs Officer. One of the most-important aspects of that cell was that our chief had direct access to the Commander and was in on most planning sessions. That paid off daily.

## **Let the media see the action**

The first major success we had at Spring Valley resulted from inviting the media on site. My organization, Huntsville Division, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, removes dangerous ordnance from sites across the country. We hold public meetings and media days at each site. Reporters need to see the action and talk to the experts. Stonewall them and they'll make you regret it.

When I arrived in Spring Valley on the morning of January 7, I immediately insisted that the media be allowed on site for a one-time photo opportunity and briefing. I also insisted that we meet with the evacuees and explain our activities to them. These suggestions were not well-received at first. By noon, however, we were allowed to bring the media onsite. This meant we had to close down removal activities for an hour, but it paid off.

The night before our "media day," stories had been negative toward the Army. Reporters said we were not telling anybody anything and did not know what we were encountering. They interviewed angry citizens and so-called experts, since no Army official was available. Then they were allowed on site and were briefed by the chemical removal expert, Lt. Col. Bill Batt. Their reports immediately focused on our expertise, our work and the dangers of the chemical munitions. We were no longer silent incompetents; our workers were smart soldiers doing dangerous work for the public good.

## **Meeting with evacuees**

Later that night, we held our first public meeting for the evacuees. From our Corps of Engineers experience, we know that, when the public is worried, it's best to quickly meet them face-to-face. These meetings build credibility and establish two-way communication. Our initial meeting was so well received that the Commander established regular nightly meetings.

I cannot give enough praise to Brig. Gen. George Friel, the Commander of the Service Response Force. Each night, he would take time out of his busy schedule to meet with local residents. He would brief them about what we did that day, show maps, slides or other material, and then answer questions. At the end of the emergency action, Friel was so well respected, that residents asked for autographed pictures.

We found out the hard way that we had to make sure that evacuee representatives were included in meetings we held with the local developer and with government officials. Bringing them into these meetings helped our relations and our credibility.

We also set up a hotline for residents to call about concerns or to get information. We made sure it was always staffed and made sure that people got answers quickly. We kept a separate hotline for reporters.

## **Keep talking to reporters**

Something else that helped us turn a negative story into a positive story was our continuous work with the media. We constantly answered their questions and set up a media center for them. I liked to walk down the hill to where reporters congregated (just outside the safety zone) and chat with them. Informally, we could talk about activities and straighten out misconceptions.

The media, by the way, demand such access. If they can't talk to you, they will talk to angry residents or anyone who thinks he or she is an expert. They also want to be close to the action. Our public affairs cell chief got on the cellular phone one day trying to set up a media center about a mile away. Within 10 minutes, he was called by a reporter, demanding that they be allowed as close as possible. We learned two things: they wanted to be close, and they monitored our cellular phone calls.

To help the reporters understand what we were doing, we published a variety of material and provided it to the media. We made sure that residents got the same material, so they would not feel that they were being excluded.

## **Don't forget the locals**

At Spring Valley, the District of Columbia government provided us a great deal of assistance. We, in turn, kept them informed of everything we were doing. This was largely a command function, carried out by the commander and his staff on a daily basis. I mention it in this paper because it's important that local officials and local regulators be part of the solution, not part of the problem. They must be included and informed.

## **Everyone's in the PR business:**

Everyone at the Spring Valley site was part of the public relations team. It didn't end with the general or his Public Affairs staff. If someone made a joke about decreased property value, that was poor public relations. If someone helped a resident, that was good public relations. For example, a soldier helped an ill resident. She couldn't evacuate her home, but was worried. He told her, "Well now, if you feel you really can't leave, I will bring a gas mask and show you how to use it."

"Then," she said, "he told me if there was any real danger, he personally would come back to my house to make sure I had my gas mask on right." We know this, by the way, because the woman talked to the Washington Post, where that story was quoted.

I can't say enough about the personal touch. For example, I went over to the evacuation center a couple of times every day to chat with the evacuees. We learned from one another. I spoke with an elderly couple who stoically sat throughout the day. I helped kids put together a puzzle. I asked the Red Cross workers how folks were doing. Public involvement is often a one-to-one

affair.

### **Public Involvement is hard work**

Public involvement is more than handing out an occasional news release. It's a dedicated activity carried out by an entire organization. It's a great deal of work. But this work pays off in eased tensions, improved relations, and media understanding. Today the Spring Valley effort continues. Baltimore District of the Corps of Engineers is carrying out Phase II of the effort. They continue the public involvement program.

Spring Valley, rather than a story about bombs in the backyard, is a good news story about the government serving its people, and the people thanking the government.