

From “Bomb Squad A Year inside the Nation’s Most Exclusive Police Unit” By Richard Esposito and Ted Gerstein (Hyperion, March 2007)

Inspector Charlie was NYPD head of the Joint Terrorism Task Force in New York. In the aftermath of 9/11, he was at the nerve center of a deluge of intelligence. None of it was good. It seemed the nation was under assault from all sides.

It was early October, and the fires at Ground Zero were still burning underground. The steel girders and beams were as white hot as a grill. They were fueled by every bit of combustible material that the towering offices had contained. The dust, the smoke, and the stink hung over the site of the declaration of war, when Wells first received the terrifying warning of a terrorist nuclear bomb being smuggled into New York.

There had already been one rumor of a nuclear device. In that case, Wells informed the mayor of New York, Rudy Giuliani, and his staff. That rumor soon became public. It was quickly dismissed as unfounded and the city deftly reassured. Teams of experts had been quietly afoot in the city, reporters were told, and they had found no evidence of a hidden radioactive device. In the climate of the day, the reports were not sensationalized as they might have been at a time when national security had less resonance to the newspaper editors and TV and radio news directors.

What neither the mayor nor the public knew was that a truly terrifying new threat was already present. A CIA source believed to be very reliable had brought the information to his handlers. Although it remains highly classified, this information has since been made public in at least two accounts. They differ in some details, but have a common thread: The CIA source appeared to have firsthand knowledge that al Qaeda had procured or made a nuclear weapon or weapons, and those either were being smuggled or were already in place in either New York, Washington, or both. At this point in time even the lowest probability event was not beyond the perception of al Qaeda’s operational capacity; especially if it had such high consequences.

Extremely secretive meetings got under way. Military commanders, NSA wizards, Department of Energy officials charged with managing such a catastrophe, CIA analysts, and Wells shuttled back and forth between Washington and New York. Meanwhile, Special Operations teams, nuclear bomb hunters from the Department of Energy Nuclear Emergency Search Teams (NEST), cops, soldiers, and FBI agents armed with radiation wands and pagers patrolled day and night. Few of them knew the specific threat behind their patrols. None of the foot soldiers knew that overhead, unmarked intelligence community aircraft with sensitive radiation detection equipment flew low and slow across the skies of New York and the capital.

“We had a whole plan to deal with it,” Wells recalled. “Military people were tasked. Timetables were made—what was the ETA for the team if the device was in D.C., if the device was in New York.” Wells was willing to discuss how he arrived at his very sober decisions on dealing with the threat, but not the information itself.

On his office wall there was a plaque from the United States Army Special Operations Command honoring his participation in this operation. There was no date and no reason on the plaque. He pointed to it to sum up just how seriously the secrecy was taken, even afterward.

“After a couple of weeks of back and forth, the bottom line was 99.9 percent the federal team wasn’t going to make it here even if we were lucky enough to intercept the

device. They had one team, and one cutter,” he said, using “cutter” as his personal shorthand for the technician who would try to defuse the bomb. “At best that team would be several hours away and well, hey, if they had to choose between Washington and New York...

“So after a couple of weeks, I decided to bring in the Bomb Squad,” Wells said. Wells and the others involved have not publicly acknowledged what happened next. The commander of the Bomb Squad at the time, Lieutenant Jerry “Pappy” Sheehan, would not even entertain a conversation about it. But those there recall him appearing in the office with a briefcase cuffed to his wrist. At Wells’s behest, a series of quiet conversations were held with the most senior members of the Bomb Squad and a few recently retired members with extensive experience.

“We had no confidence that al Qaeda was going to properly shield a device. I mean we figured we would know we found it when we found a van with the driver fried and a bomb in the back,” Wells recalled.

A handful of men, all with families, children, and some with grandchildren, were asked to volunteer to take the long walk up to the device.

“I mean, you couldn’t really order a guy....We figured someone might say no,” Wells says. But no one did.

Dennis Mulchahy, Sheehan himself, Kevin Barry, and Joe Putkowski all agreed to disarm a device knowing full well they would almost certainly die, even if they succeeded in saving the city of New York. Not one of them asked whether it was possible to defuse the device. They knew the answer; it was a bomb, more dangerous than other bombs, but with enough time and a set of hand tools they could take it apart. To this day, not one of them has even acknowledged that the event happened, or that they had been willing to walk down a street to an almost certain death.