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Civil Defense Prepares for the Threat of Nuclear Attack

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, J. Gleim, Museum Curator)



This CD-V 700 Radiological Defense Operational Set came to the Pennsylvania Military Museum from a fallout shelter in Chester County. The kit contains two radiological survey meters, a Geiger counter, two dosimeters, and instructions for use. It is designed to be used by radiological Civil Defense personnel in determining radioactive contamination levels that may result from an enemy attack or other nuclear disaster. The survey meters use a Geiger tube mounted on a probe at the end of a cable. The tube is sensitive to moderate and high-energy radiation and to gamma radiation down to low energies. The dosimeters measure radiation absorption and serve as a tool to alert personnel that they are being exposed to excessively high levels of nuclear radiation.

The American Civil Defense program began during World War I. Intended to be an organized non-military response to prepare Americans for possible military attack, the program escalated significantly during the Cold War, as heightened international tension and the threat of nuclear attack terrified the nation. Beginning in the mid-1950s, the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA) urged states to obtain radiological instruments for use in the event of a nuclear attack. Recognizing that there were no commercially available radiation detection instruments designed specifically for civil defense, the FCDA issued contracts for the design and production of the first CD-V kits. The kits were made available to states for voluntary purchase, but few did so. In 1960, the federal government issued the CD-V 700 Radiological Defense Operational Set to monitoring sites in all states. In addition to equipment and supplies, the federal Civil Defense agency also produced educational films and booklets instructing Americans on how to respond in the event of a nuclear emergency.

Responding to nuclear emergencies was coordinated at the county level. Each county had (and still has) an Emergency Operating Center that, in the event of a nuclear attack, would receive data collected using the kits provided from monitoring stations locations throughout the county. The federal government also maintained monitoring stations throughout the nation. Usually located at field offices of agencies like the Department of Agriculture, Department of Interior, or the Federal Aviation Administration, these stations were intended to be

used as coordination sites in days post-attack. From these locations, the government could help to facilitate the restoration of utilities and transportation, the distribution of critical resources, and the dissemination of data to county-operated monitoring stations.

Since the end of the Cold War, civil defense in the United States has changed dramatically. New threats such as terrorism and natural disasters have largely replaced the threat of nuclear war and in response, new forms of civil protection such as emergency management and homeland security have emerged. Today, civil protection including anti-terrorism, border security, cyber security, and disaster prevention and management is coordinated through the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.