



**Above:** Staff Sgt. Robert Grooms, 90th Missile Maintenance Squadron, lowers equipment down the Launcher Equipment Room access hatch to Staff Sgt. Tad Marshall, 90 MMXS.

**Right:** Medical group personnel performs a blood pressure check on a maintenance team member. All maintainers had to be screened medically prior to working in the Level A Bio Suit.



Mr. Jeffery Iles and Mr. Johnnie Merrell, 90 CES, prepare to set up an A Frame for possible emergency evacuation.



**Above:** Senior Airman Tim O'Neill and Staff Sgt. Beau Weber, 90 CES, fit test their gas masks prior to entering the launch facility. **Left:** Mr. John McDougall, 90th Civil Engineer Squadron, relays vital information during the Alpha 06 Gauge Incident.



PHOTOS BY MARK CRABTREE

# Gauging the incident

**1st Lt. Jason Kuhl**  
90th Maintenance Group

On Aug. 23, deep in the heart of Wyoming in the underground Launch Control Center of Alpha-01 Missile Alert Facility, the missile combat crew received indications of a propulsion system rocket engine pressure alarm indicating a possible chemical release at a remote launch facility known as Alpha-06.

Though initial indications pointed to a faulty sensor, a multi-organizational effort was launched to verify the launch facility and surrounding area were safe.

"We have some of the best trained Airmen in the world to handle potential situations like these," said Col. Evan Hoapili, commander of the 90th Space Wing. "Our teams exercise scenarios like this regularly."

In fact, during the past year Warren has practiced similar chemical leak exercise scenarios three times, each time refining the plan and training all participants. Over the years, there have been two other false indications of chemical releases, but in the history of the Minuteman III Missile System, there has never been an actual leak.

To confirm this was a faulty sensor versus an actual leak, a handpicked team consisting of personnel from the 90th Maintenance Group, 90th Medical Group, 90th Mission Support Group, and the 90th Security Forces Group left Warren at 8 a.m. on Aug. 24 to verify the area was safe and if needed, take actions to protect the surrounding community.

As the convoy approached Alpha-06, the immediate concern was to verify the safety of the access road leading to the launch facility. Mr. John McDougall, Warren fire chief and on-scene commander, and his team of fire fighters suited up and tested the area with a portable gas detector. Once the access road was determined to be safe, specialized support teams immediately established a command and control center. This consisted of everything from decontamination stations, maintenance staging areas, specialized communication, and medical areas for monitoring the health and wellness of the people that would be penetrating the launch facility.

As a precautionary measure, base officials worked with local law enforcement to set up a 600-foot cordon while the 90 SW Airmen investigated the situation.

Site penetration is the first step performed by any maintenance crew entering a launch facility.

Under normal circumstances this would be completed within minutes of arriving on site. However, the circumstances surrounding the site penetration on this day were not normal at all and would test the proficiency and teamwork of all who were involved. Col. Jodie Bliss, commander of the 90 MXG lauded the teamwork of all organizations. "The 90 SW family pulled together and worked as a team. Everybody knew what they needed to do and executed their part professionally. This is just what we want in a potential emergency situation."

Each maintenance technician who entered the site was dressed in a Level A Bio Suit designed to protect against exposure to the hazardous gasses associated with the rocket engine. The bio suit has a breathing tube connected to a compressor that provides certified clean air.

The suits are very large, making movement difficult and physically straining to anyone working in them. Exhaustion and dehydration are serious safety concerns. Members from the medical group provided support by medically screening all of the technicians prior to suiting up and monitoring them after exiting the area.

The maintenance technicians were split into two teams that rotated every 90 minutes based on time limits associated with working inside the Level A Bio Suit. Team one comprised of Staff Sgt. Bill Mayo, 90 MXG, and Staff Sgt. Chris Keck, 90 MOS. Team two was made up of Staff Sgt. Tad Marshall, 90 MMXS and Staff Sgt. Robert Grooms, 90 MOS.

In addition to the maintenance teams required to perform the task, the Warren fire department had an 11-man team on site for immediate evacuation of injured personnel and decontamination, if necessary.

The on site command center was in constant communication with the Missile Potential Hazard Network, which consisted of the 90 SW battle staff and personnel from 20th Air Force, the Intercontinental Ballistic Missile System Program office, and Headquarters Air Force Space Command. The MPH Network coordinated and approved all of the procedural steps required to do the task.

Working together, this team confirmed the alarm was not due to a leak in the system and there was never a threat to the surrounding community. According to Lt. Col. L.B. Mobley, senior maintenance officer on site, "Even though this was a potentially dangerous situation, this team of professionals, represented by every organization on this base, really made it look easy."