

For your eyes only

By Frank Johnson



Recently we were discussing the construction of a blast proof building for central control room.

Security is an interesting topic these days, especially as it concerns the threat of terrorists.

I have been in the depths of facilities at Savannah River, Oak Ridge, and other U.S. government facilities. The most strenuous requirement I had to meet was to leave the beer I had in my trunk

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at the guard gate and to wear a dosing badge that would indicate any radiation exposure. I did register a positive one time, and I like to tell my kids that is why they are so smart.

Several years ago, in pre 9/11 days, I was asked to visit a government facility to advise on the use of sensors in some high temperature conditions where accuracy and repeatability were critical.

I had never been to that facility and was very surprised by the welcome I received. There were guards outside the outside entrance with machine guns. I had never seen this extreme type of security in the U.S. in my life. I had seen machine guns at gas stations in Venezuela and at airports in Europe, but not here.

The guards checked me out with very serious looks, and after I handed them a business card, they allowed me to proceed to the lobby. There I met a very pleasant receptionist who called the person I was supposed to meet.

He came up and apologized for the security measures, but he indicated we were not through yet. I had to take my briefcase and open it for inspection. They then asked if I had to have it, and I said "not necessarily."

They allowed me a pad and a pen only. I had to leave everything else with the receptionist. I then

proceeded to a room off the side of the lobby where I passed through a metal detector similar to what we use today at the airports.

I had been through one of those before, and it was not a big deal. Next, they put me into a closeted box where the machine blew great gusts of wind all around me. They warned me that I would have to be in there for at least a full minute and I could turn around and go home if that was a problem. Hell, I was excited about the experience.

After release from that explosives detection chamber, I walked along a path to the lobby of a second building. There they instructed me to put on a blindfold and place my hand on the shoulder of my escort.

They doubled up the blindfold so I could not even peek out of the corners, and we walked through a labyrinth of doors and corridors. All the turns, stops, and doorways made it seem like I was the little round person in the Pac-Man game.

Finally, we arrived at our destination in the laboratory. There technicians described the process to me, and we had a very fruitful discussion about the application. Inside the lab, all the instruments except the temperature related devices had opaque cloths covering them to keep me from seeing what was there.

I said, "Guys, I am on your side, you know." They said they knew, but rules are rules.

I was able to count the stairs, and we did take an elevator ride, so I expect we were pretty far underground. I must say, that was the most restricted place I have ever been.

I never saw anything other than what I was supposed to see, but it was a pretty cool experience after all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Frank Johnson (temperature@msn.com) is the founder of JMS Southeast Inc., a manufacturer of industrial and OEM temperature sensing devices in Statesville, N.C. He is a 23-year member of ISA and was a section president. He worked on technical committees for the ASTM, IEC, ASME, and ISA.