



Dateline

October 28, 2001

"Dark Cloud"

producer: Lindsey K. Schwartz

editor: Tresa Verna

NBC

Announcer: Here now is Stone Phillips.

Phillips: Since nuclear power plants first started providing electricity to people around the world back in the 1950s, their critics have worried about the dangers of accidents. The disaster at Chernobyl was bad enough, they say.

Now, a new worry. And it's not about accidents. September 11th taught us that anything can become a terrorist's target. How close could terrorists actually get to a nuclear power plant? Here's Victoria Corderi.



Announcer: He is a piano tuner with a mission. And it has nothing to do with music. For 20 years, this has been Scott Portzline's waking obsession -- the imposing nuclear energy compound known as Three Mile Island.

Portzline: There's not enough guards to defend all the equipment, all the vital area doors.

Announcer: It is the site of the most famous nuclear accident in U.S. History.

That was 1979. In 2001, in this new age of anything goes terrorism, some experts say it is a different kind of accident waiting to happen. But, this amateur security sleuth says he knew that, long before September 11th.

Portzline: It takes rocket science to build the plants, but it doesn't take rocket science to turn 'em upside down.

Announcer: He's been collecting information for years as part of his one man crusade to improve Three Mile Island's security.

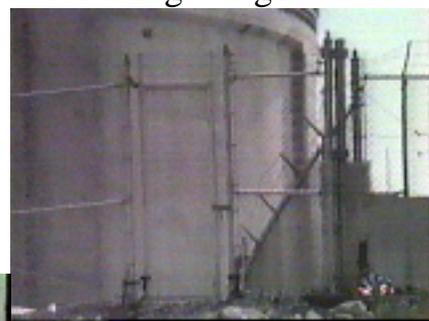


What you're about to see is what he's shown to state and federal authorities in his quest to convince them to improve nuclear plant security.

First, in public files, he was surprised to find detailed documents and floor plans of the plant.

In 1993, took his test one step further. He rented a boat and took his video camera along. He got to a fence just 100 yards from the reactor. Would anybody stop him if he approached the perimeter?

Portzline: We got a boat and we circled Three Mile Island and identified different buildings, showed how close we could get to the buildings.



Announcer: And no one stopped him. But, it didn't end there.

Portzline: And we rented a plane. And we flew over Three Mile Island and we were able to identify every building.



Announcer: Eight years ago flying over Three Mile Island would not have been considered a security breach, but Scott Portzline thought it should have been, along with access by boat and the availability of floor plans.

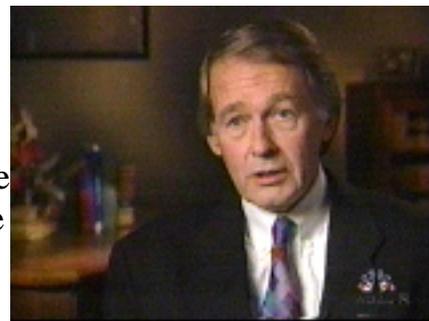
Portzline tried repeatedly to alert authorities and even testified before a federal committee. He says he was politely thanked for his time.

Portzline: The truth was, they didn't act on it.

Announcer: Everything we're telling you about security at the power plants is public knowledge, and a prominent lawmaker says the country has made a mistake by not talking enough about the potential for terrorism at nuclear plants.

Congressman Ed Markey has been calling attention to the same issues as Portzline for years, and says he's been getting the same response.

Markey: I've been trying for ten years to have the Nuclear Regulatory Commission increase security at civilian nuclear power plants.



Announcer: Markey, a senior member of the House committee that oversees the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, says smaller planes don't pose a big threat to the reactors, but he is worried about the threat they pose to the buildings nearby where radioactive spent fuel rods are stored. These areas are often less secure.

Markey: A small plane might find that storage area a highly attractive target.

Announcer: Throughout the country, there are 103 active nuclear powerplants and 14 that are decommissioned, which means they are no longer providing electricity, yet they still hold radioactive material. The question is whether a plane or an act of sabotage could turn a plant into a radiological weapon.

Lochbaum: The worst case would be the release of radiation into the atmosphere, into the countryside.



Announcer: David Lochbaum is a nuclear engineer who worked in several plants in the U.S. He is now with the Union of Concerned Scientists -- a watchdog organization that monitors the nuclear industry. He thinks, regardless of the cause, any major release of radiation could be catastrophic.

Lochbaum: In a reactor accident, you can kill tens of thousands of people and render large populations of the countryside uninhabitable for decades.

Announcer: When power plants were engineered in the '60s, The design took into consideration natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes and even the possibility of a small plane crashing into its thick containment walls. But, the designers did not take into account an attack like that of September 11th, where a fully fueled commercial airliner becomes, in essence, a guided missile.



Corderi: They never thought there would be a missile attack, that we'd ever be attacked on our territory, even back in the '60s?

Lochbaum: Not by individual terrorists. It was thought that we might be attacked by foreign countries, but the military would be the protection against that. Individual plant owners weren't required to provide that kind of protection.

Announcer: Today, the worry is that a commercial airliner could crash into a nuclear power plant, causing an explosion or a fire and a core meltdown, eventually releasing radioactive material into the atmosphere. In fact, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the federal agency that oversees the nuclear industry, was concerned about it years ago.



"Dateline" obtained this 100-page report, commissioned by the NRC in 1982. It says a commercial airline crash into a power plant could "lead to a rather violent explosion" with a "direct release



of radioactivity."

Lachbaum says he is also concerned from the ground, such as trucks. They could cause major problems, he says, especially at plants that have been shut down and maintain

minimal security.



Lochbaum: It's easier for the terrorists to drive right through the main gate and drive the truck right up to the building and set it off, 'cause the guards are inside the building. They would find out about it when they heard the noise.

Announcer: The Nuclear Regulatory Commission knows that terrorism is a potential problem. For years It has been performing mock assaults like this one on nuclear plants to test their readiness in fending off a terrorist attack. Almost half of the time, the would be terrorists penetrate the plants.



Lochbaum: They're generally warned about six months in advance that the mock terrorists are gonna be there on such and such a day.

Corderi: And yet they still fail? That seems unbelievable.

Lochbaum: The notice has to be there though, because if they showed up unannounced, the guards would be using live ammo and somebody could get hurt.

Corderi: But, why do they fail?

Lochbaum: Because it's money. Security's not considered to be a need, a necessity. Making electricity is the reason these plants were built, so all the money goes into making electricity, not into making the plants safe.

Announcer: The NRC says the plants are safe and that they have security, like vehicle barriers, and armed guards are not always visible from the road.

Scott Portzline never stopped watching. On September 8th, just three days before the attack that changed America, he was once again at Three Mile Island with his video camera documenting security measures.



Portzline: There was no guard and the gate was wide open.

Corderi: And just last week, Three Mile Island received what federal officials called a "credible threat" and was shut down for four hours. The Harrisburg airport, which is just three miles from here, was also closed for several hours. And the FAA closed the airspace around the plant.

The threat turned out to be a false alarm, but, since September 11th, the NRC has placed the country's 103 nuclear power plants, including Three Mile Island, on a state of high alert. And that means extra security. At some facilities, smaller airplanes are restricted from the airspace

and several plants now even have the National Guard in place to help oversee the perimeter.

According to Ralph Beedle from the Nuclear Energy Institute, the main lobbying group that represents the nuclear industry, that kind of aggressive governmental protection is what's needed to keep the plants safe from international terrorism. It would have been impossible, he says, for the industry alone to have been prepared for the kind of attack we saw on on September 11th.



Corderi: So you think that's an impossible security litmus test? It's not up to an industry, to have to think about fending off a, what's in essence a guided missile?

Beedle: That's correct.

Corderi: But if it were to happen, you agree that with the design, a plant would be in trouble.

Beedle: The plant would be in trouble. There's no doubt about that. Now the question is --



Corderi: The larger question --

Beedle: The larger question is, would that plant pose a risk to the public from a radiological release? And it's my belief that it does not. We have an extremely robust design for that plant. So, the chances that that aircraft would penetrate and rupture that containment, I think is extremely remote.

Announcer: Beedle insists that plants across the country are safe. And, he says, the fact that nearly 50% of the power plants had problems with mock terrorist assaults should not worry people.

Beedle: 40% or 50% of the time, and I don't know exactly what that number is, there have been some vulnerabilities that were identified during the conduct of these examinations, for which the utility took corrective action and either improved the training for the officers, or provided some different kinds of equipment.

Corderi: So everything's been remedied?

Beedle: Everything has been remedied.

Announcer: Whether that's the case is impossible to verify, but, according to Beedle, critics have a clear motivation to make these plants look unsafe.

Beedle: Trying to twist the results of these reviews, to make it look like the plants are without any security, it think is absolutely irresponsible on the part of these people that are doing it.

Corderi: What's the motivation, to twist this? Is it pure anti-nuke propaganda.

Beedle: In my opinion, I believe that to be the case.

Announcer: The NRC declined "Dateline's" request for an on-camera interview because of security concerns, saying only that protection has been fortified at plants around the country.



Congressman markey says he thinks the federal government has to be involved permanently in order to provide long-term changes in the way plants are protected, adding things like anti-aircraft guns to shoot missiles or hijacked planes out of the sky, and a national guardforce to secure the perimeter.

Markey: But, the nuclear industry itself still holds onto the notion that "it can't happen here." And, as a result, they don't have to pay for all of the increased security that would be necessary.



Announcer: Ultimately, the issue of how much security nuclear plants need may be up to the newly appointed head of homeland security, Tom Ridge. Those who fear what may happen when bad intentions meet up with nuclear power say the issue needs to be addressed right away.

Lochbaum: If you look at September 11th, you see that terrorists are willing to take extraordinary measures to attack the United States. That is a bad combination. Nuclear power plants not being adequately protected, and people out there wanting to exploit our weaknesses.



Announcer: And as for Scott Portzline, now this piano tuner with a mission is fast losing faith that he can ever make a difference.



Portzline: Trying to change the small things along the way at the plants for security hasn't been effective. And now that this could be a reality, I'm uncomfortable as can be. I hate it. I'm giving up. Maybe the rest of the country will write some letters and make some phone calls.

end

