

# CLEAN GEAR

## ‘Protection Against Disaster’

by Haley Jorgensen

**I** can remember laying gear down and taking a garden hose and washing it off,” says Fred McKinney, firefighter and Board of director at North Queensbury Fire Co., in Cleverdale, N.Y. “Today’s technology allows for clean gear all the time.” And that’s a good thing, according to McKinney, who maintains there’s no excuse for dirty gear.

To ensure the safety of its 40 firefighters and the people they serve, North Queensbury requires that all soiled turnout gear be properly cleaned using the department’s 30-pound capacity Continental Pro-Series™ Washer-Extractor. “Our guys are expected to keep gear clean,” says McKinney. “It’s their protection against disaster.”

### **Dirty Gear is a Health Hazard**

Soiled gear can expose firefighters to toxins and carcinogens that enter the body

through ingestion, inhalation or absorption, according to the National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA). Such exposure, says NFPA, “can add up over time and cause health problems.”

“The carbons on the gear are known for plugging up the fabric,” says McKinney. “It has to be washed and cleaned. It needs to be clean for the personal protection of the firefighter.”

To ensure the safety of American firefighters the NFPA recommends fire departments clean dirty gear after exposure to fire, body fluids or hazardous materials. The NFPA is also careful to avoid cross-contamination by warning against cleaning gear in homes or public laundries.

“If gear is dirty, you can’t tell if the integrity of the fire gear is unsafe,” adds Gene Konzen, deputy chief at Wayne Township Fire Dept. Indianapolis. “Any kind of petroleum residues remaining

on gear following a fire or accident can be flammable.”

That’s why more and more fire departments, like North Queensbury, are installing industrial washer-extractors equipped to properly clean heavy turnout gear. Among them, Wayne Township, which recently installed a its own Continental washer-extractor.

### **Choosing a Soft-Mount Washer**

Wayne Township’s 300 firefighters, who provide fire, Emergency Medical Services (EMS) and Hazardous Materials

Safety (HAZMAT) services, expects to respond to 10,000 separate incidents in 2004 – many relating to hazards associated with chemical spills, car accidents and fires. But until recently, the sprawling fire department, with a number of stations separated by several miles, had trouble ensuring gear was consistently cleaned and inspected following a contaminating event. Part of the problem was that the department’s old hard-mount washer couldn’t handle the influx of gear and didn’t extract enough water, leaving gear out of service to dry for days. Because the old hard-mount washer sat at a firehouse miles away from headquarters, it was a challenge for Asset Manager Wes Lock to keep accurate tabs on how gear was washed. Since gear took upwards of three days to dry, lack of space was also a concern. The laundry area was constantly packed with hanging gear. Searching for a solution to their gear-cleaning nightmare, the department turned to Haiges Machinery, a Continental distributor with offices in Indianapolis and Huntly, Ill., for advice.

### **Slashing Dry Time with High Extract**

Bob Hale, salesman for Haiges Machinery, recommended and installed a 55-pound and 30-pound, soft-mount Continental Pro-Series Washer-Extractor at the department’s main headquarters. Any dirty gear is now bagged and brought there, where it is properly cleaned and inspected. The washers’ greatest advantage, according to Lock, is that they have dramatically cut the time it takes gear to air dry.

“Our previous washer’s extract cycle left items almost soaking wet,” he says. “Gear took 72 hours to dry out. Now it air dries in eight to 10 hours.”

By cutting dry time, firefighters are more quickly re-equipped with their own, custom-fit gear—their best protection from on-the-job hazards, according to Konzen. Most fire departments don’t own a second set of custom-fit gear for each firefighter,





which may increase the odds of firefighters using wet gear—a dangerous option. “Damp gear,” says Konzen, “can produce steam burns that are just as bad as getting burned by fire itself. It’s not a good idea to have wet gear.”

The high-speed extract of the Continentals have also solved the fire department’s space dilemma, adds Lock, because gear returns to service “nearly 10 times faster.” Firefighters, as a result, are better protected that much sooner.

### Easy to Install, Soft-mount Design

North Queensbury, like Wayne Township, liked the high-extract and ease of installation offered by the Continental soft-mount design. The fire company provides mountain, ice and water rescue, in addition to fire and EMS services, thanks to its diverse location on the shores of Lake George and the Adirondack Mountains. Like Wayne Township, North Queensbury turned to a Continental distributor, Gauch Distributing in Albany, N.Y., to find the right washer for its needs.

“We have in-floor heat and didn’t want to get a hard-mount washer,” says McKinney. “We didn’t want to take the risk of drilling through one of the hot water lines.” Unlike hard-mount washers, which must be bolted to concrete foundations, soft mounts slide easily into place. Simultaneously, they remove considerably more water thanks to extract speeds of up to 387-G-force.

“Gear comes out and it’s almost in new condition and nearly dry,” says McKinney. “It dries for a day and it’s back in service.”

### Easy to Program and Use

An industrial washer-extractor, the Continental also offers superior washability, according to McKinney, who says North Queensbury had relied on a home-style topload to clean turnout gear for years. “The old machine labored to do the job,” says McKinney. “But when we started using the Continental, stuff came out like brand new.”

Left: Fred McKinney, firefighter and Board of director at North Queensbury Fire Co. in Cleverdale, N.Y., with the department’s 30-pound capacity Pro-Series Washer-Extractor. Center: North Queensbury Fire Co. Right: Wayne Township Fire Department’s Asset Manager, Wes Lock, next to the department’s 55-pound capacity Pro-Series Washer-Extractor.

The Continental combines highly programmable controls and automatic chemical (detergent) injection for superior cleaning that results in extended gear life, according to Lock and McKinney. By removing deposits that can otherwise breakdown fabrics, gear is more properly maintained, and as a result, more effective.

“The washers get the tar off,” says Lock of the new Continentals. “The other washer didn’t. That’s how good they work.”

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### Extending Gear Life— A Worthwhile Investment

To retain the integrity of protective apparel, both firehouses adhere to manufacturers’ cleaning guidelines. In doing so, only approved chemicals, in exact quantities, are automatically injected at the appropriate water temperature and cycle. This not only makes the washers simple to use with one-touch operation, it offers consistent and approved cleaning every time.

“We didn’t have chemical injection before and we had a lot of problems,” adds Lock. “We’d have people washing gear at 3 a.m., and putting in Tide or Dawn or OxiClean, which broke down and discolored gear.”

By cleaning gear the right way, both McKinney and Lock believe it will last longer, which may save their departments’

thousands in the long run. Last year alone, North Queensbury added 10 new firefighters. Equipping them with a set of turnout and extrication gear cost around \$2,000 per person, or \$20,000 total. Each new set is an investment worth protecting.

Thanks to today’s technologies, there’s no longer an excuse for soiled turnout gear, according to McKinney. Clean gear is a matter of safety—a firefighter’s “protection against disaster.” By installing Continental Pro-Series Washer-Extractors to properly clean EMS suits, turnout and extrication gear, both North Queensbury and Wayne Township are helping to ensure firefighter and public safety. Simultaneously, they’re also maintaining and protecting gear so it functions properly, lasts longer and looks professional.

“We can’t be running across oriental rugs in dirty gear,” says McKinney of the North Queensbury Fire Co., which often serves Lake George custom homeowners. Today, clean gear denotes professionalism, according to McKinney and Lock. Grimy gear doesn’t.

*Continental Girbau, Inc. is a world-renowned provider of commercial and industrial laundry equipment and laundry production systems. Continental’s Pro-Series washers are available in 18- to 255-pound capacities and are backed by the company’s 5-Year/3-Year limited parts warranty. For more information about Continental products, or to locate a distributor in your area, call 800-256-1073 or visit [www.cont-girbau.com](http://www.cont-girbau.com). To view the NFPA’s 1851 standard regarding the cleaning and decontamination of protective gear, visit [www.wfrfire.com/website/clothing/access/nfpa.htm#clean](http://www.wfrfire.com/website/clothing/access/nfpa.htm#clean).*