

In the business of easing fear

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By Ben Benton

Staff Writer

MONTEAGLE, Tenn. -- Remagen Safe Rooms engineer Jim Waller said his business always has been driven by people's worst nightmares. But he said today's worries about natural disaster and terrorism seem more real than those in the years of the Cold War and fallout shelters.

Mr. Waller said his company, started in 1996, produces shelters to protect people from all that Mother Nature and fellow humans can hurl at them.

Structures built as safe havens have evolved over the years as peoples' fears changed, Mr. Waller said.

"At the time of fallout shelters, there was no question about it; we were in a dangerous era of our history," he said. "The Soviet Union and the United States, China and France, Great Britain all had nuclear weapons."

People worried that "trigger happiness" could bring the end of the world, he said.

But real threats today are more likely to come from nature, such as the tornado that struck last week in nearby Kimball, Tenn., he said.

It takes major disaster to prod people's fears enough that they'll commit to safeguards, he said. Most equate the odds of dying in a tornado with those winning the lottery, he said, "although they may be threatened by a tornado once a year."

"You can't argue with probabilities," he said. "However, people will spend \$3,000 or \$5,000 on a home entertainment (system) or \$25,000 on an automobile, and they won't pay \$5,000 or \$8,000 on a tornado shelter."

Remagen's shelters are designed to withstand wind-driven objects striking the structure at more than 100 mph and gunfire from a variety of small arms. They will protect against intruders as well as tornadoes, and can double as walk-in vaults, he said.

Dr. Ernst Kiesling, executive director of the National Storm Shelter Association and a professor of civil engineering at Texas Tech, said the industry reflects public concerns.

People a few decades ago thought nothing could protect them from tornadoes, which were thought to have wind speeds of more than 700 mph, Mr. Kiesling said.

He said growing knowledge about storms and awareness of what's available have increased the demand for shelters.

But danger from other people is a fear that wasn't as common a few years ago, he said.

"The concept of the safe room is relatively new," Mr. Kiesling said. "I think more and more people are more accepting the concept of a safe room for storm protection, but then also it quickly extends to protecting valuables and providing occupant protection against intrusion from terrorists or robbers."

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The U.S. military recognizes the potential uses of Remagen's design and technology. It has contracted with Mr. Waller's company, Bastogne Manufacturing, a joint effort with McMinnville, Tenn.-based Metal Products Co. that offers gun- and bombproof structures, according to the company's Web site, www.bastogne-mfg.com.

Texas Tech has helped test and research the structures for military applications and for domestic firms working in the Middle East, he said.

The company is developing a shelter called a Blast Cubicle which must be as portable as the military forces it protects and fit on standard-sized pallets for transportation, he said.

Large-scale applications work not only for the military but for industries and schools that need to protect large numbers of people and valuables, he said.

In 1998, Jack McElwain put a storm closet in his home in Antioch, Tenn., because severe weather was becoming more frequent, he said.

"I've been in one tornado in my life and I've had that experience and know what Mother Nature's force can do," said Mr. McElwain, 70. "I decided that a safe room was a smart thing to have."

Mr. McElwain said fears change with the times.

"Whatever the threat of the day was got peoples' attention, and all that's changed," he said. "The Cold War days are over, the Cuban missile threat and all that sort of thing, that's all kind of gone by."

He said a shelter against storms today could have other uses no one knows about yet.

"Who knows what tomorrow holds?" Mr. McElwain said.

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