

TACTICAL TERMINOLOGY

Planning and Implementation (Decision Points and Trip Wires)

By Sid Heal

Not only are tactical operations time sensitive but they are future oriented and driven by decisions. A commander can be very easily overwhelmed by the number of decisions if forced to make every one himself. Although subordinate commanders can remove some of this burden, some decisions are clearly strategic in nature and should be personally made by the incident commander. At other times, an operation may proceed according to a plan but reach a point where further direction is necessary to ensure success. Because these junctures can often be identified with a high degree of certainty, decision points and trip wires become useful tools in implementing complex plans.

A "decision point" is a technique which is incorporated into a tactical plan to call attention to the need to make a decision. It identifies an event, time or sequence at which further guidance is necessary to proceed. When a decision point is reached, the decision is automatically defaulted to the commander (or the person he designates) for further

guidance.

A closely-related but distinct concept is a "trip wire." Like its namesake used to automatically set off booby traps, a trip wire is used to automatically implement a plan, procedure or series of actions. Trip wires afford instant action within predetermined guidelines without burdening a busy commander with needless concern over decisions which will be better and more effective when made later in the operation. They provide a mechanism to allow complex plans to be developed and briefed yet instantly implemented in the "heat of battle."

Decision points and trip wires are excellent tools to relieve a commander of anxiety by allowing him to concentrate on the tasks at hand without neglecting future operations. This keeps the operation from running ahead of him. Each of these tools can usually be identified on a map or

Continued on page 82.



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Continued from page 81.

diagram where (or when) a commander must make a decision or invoke some action in order to seize or retain the initiative. The key element regarding the placement of these tools is time. When a decision point or trip wire is reached there must remain sufficient time to detect and implement the commander's decision.

To illustrate how these tools work, let's imagine an incident involving a barricaded suspect with hostages. The commander is advised that oncoming darkness will have a dreadful impact on a successful resolution. The commander is willing to accept any alternative as long as it leads to the safe release of the hostages, but prefers to arrest the suspect as well. Not wishing to kill the suspect outright, the commander agrees to accept some risk to the hostages to achieve this goal. But if the operation continues into the hours of darkness, the hostages remain vulnerable, while the tactical team's ability to intervene becomes greatly diminished. The risk becomes unacceptable. Therefore, the commander places a decision point at a given time and preparations are made to achieve a satisfactory solution while it remains viable.

A trip wire could be added if the commander decided to use a tactical intervention if a suspect kills a hostage. For example, a tactical team could be predeployed and all other aspects of the operation would continue until a suspect killed a hostage. Without further instructions, the intervention would be executed according to the commander's earlier decision.

Decision points and trip wires are among the most valuable tools available to a commander to avoid becoming overwhelmed by events. Each of these techniques allow detailed planning and preparation without necessitating implementation. This has a profound impact in economy of force by allowing personnel to rest, refugee centers to be set up, food stuffs and equipment to be staged as well as the myriad of other tasks which would be exacerbated, or even prevented, if one attempted to condense them solely into the execution phase of an operation. ■

"Time is of the Essence"

Tactical operations which involve an adversary (such as a barricaded suspect) are not only time sensitive but time competitive. This means that opportunities neglected by one side are often exploited by the other.

The time concept is also applicable to trip wires. For example, events such as darkness, daylight, shifting winds, rain and other factors are all events which can be used as trip wires but are impossible to plot on a map or diagram. The event itself can be a trip wire. An example might be the intervention plan for a hostage rescue which is automatically implemented when a hostage is shot.

