

# UNDERSTANDING SITUATIONAL AWARENESS

By Sid Heal

The four essential requirements for making an effective tactical decision are training, education, experience and situational awareness. The first three are solely the attributes of an individual. They are a personal investment, often requiring great effort. During times of crisis, that individual's contributions to planning and decision-making have greater value than others because of increased knowledge and understanding. While an agency may provide opportunities (such as training) to assist someone, it is only that individual's personal effort and initiative that increase these abilities.

Situational awareness, however, is context-specific; it only applies to a specific set of circumstances and can only be attained as the situation develops. It provides the framework of understanding necessary to develop corrective measures. While each new situation contributes to greater experience and facilitates comprehension for future incidents, the irony is that the test comes before the lessons.

*Situational awareness* (sometimes referred to as SA) is a concept that describes a person's knowledge and understanding of the circumstances, surroundings and influences about an unfolding situation. It includes everything that is known about the situation leading to the current episode, as well as the impact it might have on other incidents. It stands to reason that the more unique or complex the operation, the more difficult this is to achieve.

Studies have shown that there are at least three levels of situational aware-

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ness. The most basic is simply observing the elements in a situation, including the status, attributes and dynamics of the relevant factors and influences. Depending on the nature of the incident, it might involve things like color, size, location, odors, estimates, actions and the like. For example, imagine an observer watching what appears to be some type of protest demonstration from a distance. Things like the size of the crowd, the location of the event, the noise and shouts of the people, all provide recognition as to what is occurring and a rough appraisal of the volatility of the incident. There are hundreds of other observations possible, but not all are pertinent. Even more importantly, an inexperienced and untrained observer has no idea what is applicable and can easily be lost or misled by the innumerable possibilities.

The next level involves a synthesis of the observations and enables the decision-maker to comprehend their importance. In this way, the decision-maker forms a holistic mental picture that provides a more complete comprehension of the situation. Understandably, a person with experience, good training and education is far more capable of grasping not only what is occurring, but its implications.

Consider the same scenario from the perspective of a seasoned officer, who not only makes the same observations as the novice observer but also recognizes the intensity of emotions, the behaviors of individuals, the verbiage on signs and the proximity of counter-protesters. The officer might then consider the potential effects of things like weather, temperature, darkness, rush-hour traffic and other influences. These are factors that may not actually be present but are expected and will have an impact when they do. Thus, the seasoned officer knows what to look for and makes an intuitive estimate of the probability of their occurrence and what might happen if they come to pass.

The highest level of situational awareness provides an ability to project future actions based upon what has been observed and their significance. This level is particularly important in that it enables the decision-maker to determine priorities, such as what needs to be done first and what can wait. Even without a full comprehension of the situation, a person who can understand the factors and influences in play well enough to anticipate what is likely to come gains a substantial, often decisive, advantage in crafting cours-

es of action that will generate a more favorable conclusion.

Staying with our current example, imagine if the seasoned officer (observer) realizes that the protesters are gaining numbers from people walking from a nearby parking lot, and that they are nearly all facing toward a government building related to the cause a short distance away with the counter-protesters in between. The officer then begins a series of "mental simulations." Is the current location merely a staging area where parking is available? Is the intent to march to the government building? What will be the likely reaction if the counter-protesters interfere? Regardless, it is becoming clearer that without some type of intervention, the risk of a full-fledged riot is a very real possibility. Because of this ability to anticipate the logical consequences of the unfolding circumstances, alternatives are available that will not be adequate if the situation is allowed to develop along its current path of least resistance. This final step of situational awareness then allows the decision-maker to begin crafting courses of action.

It is clear, by now, that situational awareness is more than simply perceiving information. Both the novice and the seasoned observer have been watching the same situation but with vastly different levels of comprehension. The seasoned officer looks for factors and influences that will have effects, even if they are not yet present. Moreover, the seasoned officer is able to create mental simulations that project into the future as to what is likely to occur and so gains an ability to recognize alternatives and courses of action that will prevent an adverse outcome.

It is important to note that situational awareness is extremely sensitive to time. First, it is acquired and enhanced over time as a person gains more insight and understanding as the situation progresses. Second, factors like motion,

direction, speed, cycles, durations, intervals, status, and so forth, are not only defined in time but require time for recognition. Third, observed factors and influences are used to anticipate what is likely to happen in the future. Thus, observations of things that have already occurred in the past are used to make decisions in the present to affect the state of affairs in the future. Situational awareness, then, is best viewed as "a state of knowledge" at a given time.

Also, because situational awareness is highly dependent upon a decision-maker's ability to identify and understand the significance of relevant factors, it is always somewhat unique. Two persons viewing the same incident at the same time, will always have somewhat different backgrounds, perspectives and interpretations. What is more, it is fluid. Over time, events

can affirm original conclusions or, conversely, challenge them. Imagine a police officer rushing to a reported explosion, but while on the way hears of a robbery in progress. Coincidence? Or is the explosion a ruse for the robbery? The decision is difficult but the vital importance of a high level of situational awareness is indisputable. ■

Next issue: Gaining Situational Awareness



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