

# TACTICAL TERMINOLOGY

## Topic Area: Implementation (OBE Condition)

By Sid Heal

In spite of the fact that successful tactical commanders are often judged by their ability to simultaneously handle multiple issues, it is not humanly possible to continually appraise an endless amount of information. Both human intellect and memory are finite. As more information is presented than can be comprehended, older information is either deleted (forgotten), reprioritized (jumbled) or neglected (overlooked). The term used to describe this condition is usually identified by its acronym "OBE" (pronounced o-bee), which stands for "Overwhelmed By Events" or sometimes "Overcome By Events." Common symptoms are manifested in behavior such as shouting at subordinates, countermanding previous orders or displays of temper. Other more subtle symptoms include headaches, confusion and anxiety. A commander afflicted with OBE is ineffective and, without some remedy, will inevitably reach a point where he simply "implodes."

There are two situations which are particularly prone to the OBE condition. The first is when a commander acquires an inordinate span of control. This is particularly significant since operations often grow faster than a commander's ability to handle them. The commander soon becomes inundated with decisions that should be made by subordinates. The commander loses the ability to direct the efforts of the organization as a whole when he becomes overwhelmed with the details of one or two functions. Generally, the span of control for individuals with emergency management responsibilities should be smaller than those conducting routine operations. Factors such as the kind of incident, complexity of the task, hazards and safety factors all

have considerable influence on the number of subordinates an individual can effectively supervise. The early identification of a maximum span of control will aid in assigning subordinate commanders and avoid the OBE condition. Generally, this has been determined to be about five subordinates.

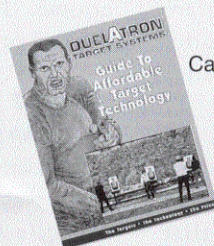
The second situation occurs when a commander feels a need for excessive control. While most everyone will recognize the futility of attempting to control every facet of even small tactical operations, some commanders are extremely uncomfortable with relinquishing any authority. This not only encumbers the commander with trivial details but inhibits the initiative of subordi-

nates. Further, since this requires virtually every decision to be passed up the chain of command, the tempo of the operation is reduced to a snail's pace in order to accommodate the limitations of a single human, regardless of personal skill, knowledge or ability. For a more detailed understanding of tempo, see "Tempo and Initiative," *The Tactical Edge*, Summer 1996, page 75.

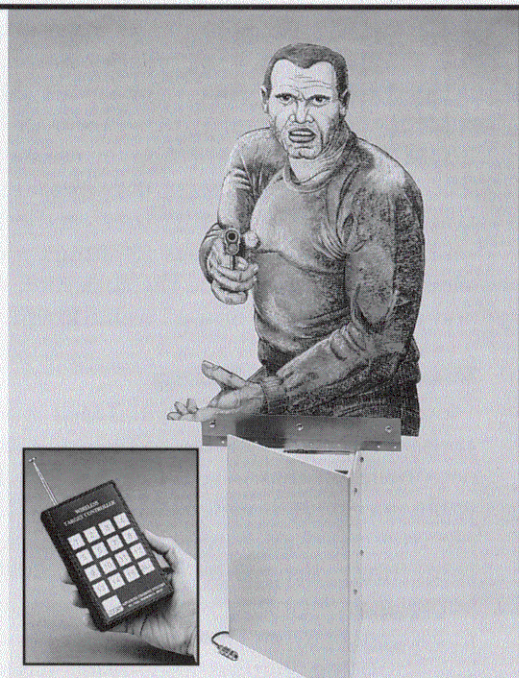
Without exception, every commander will at some time experience the OBE condition. All the same, early recognition and avoiding the circumstances which are most predisposed for it to occur can dramatically reduce its impact. ■

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