

PHASES OF HOSTAGE RECOVERY OPERATIONS

By Sid Heal

Photo courtesy of Colleen Popiny, NTOA Photographer



Many crises are too complex to be resolved in a single step. To increase comprehension and reduce risk, they must be simplified. One tried and true method is to conduct the operation in phases. A *phase* may be best understood as a stage in an interactive sequence that is identifiable from other stages by the focus on a particular enabling objective. Phases allow planners and decision-makers to reduce complexity by solving a problem incrementally. Some problems are repeated so often that the responses become standardized. In this role, phases gain additional value in increasing understanding and collaboration.

Irrefutably, hostage recovery operations¹ are among the most complex tactical interventions likely to be encountered in domestic law enforcement and as such, benefit greatly by employing phases. One of the best systems for handling these situations was developed in the mid-1980s and is organized into five distinct phases: planning, rehearsal, movement, assault and withdrawal.

PLANNING

A successful hostage recovery operation, by definition, must secure the safety of the hostages. This can be achieved by one or more of three methods: neutralizing the hostage-taker's² ability to harm

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the hostages, freeing the hostages or protecting the hostages from the hostage-taker in some manner.

Because the safety of the hostages is paramount, the focus of planning is on any means to accomplish this objec-

tive. Thus, the neutralization of the hostage-taker is an enabling objective rather than an end in itself. By implication, this means that success may be achieved even if the hostage-taker is allowed to escape! Conversely, it may mean killing the hostage-taker as part of a rescue. Likewise, hostages may be released as a result of negotiations or even on the whim of the hostage-taker. In addition, hostages often escape, which accomplishes the same purpose without an assault.

Lastly, the most common method of protecting hostages without actually freeing them is by “sheltering in place,” meaning that the hostages are protected in some manner without actually freeing them. This is often done by assigning a component to surround and defend the hostages where they are found.

Once the hostages are no longer in danger, the entire tenor and focus of the operation changes and options to resolve the situation that may have been too risky when hostages were in danger become viable.

REHEARSAL

Physical interventions, usually in the form of assaults,³ are too complex and too important to leave anything to chance. Accordingly, rehearsals are conducted to detect flaws and polish procedures. Whenever possible, rehearsals should be practiced “full dress” to include all weapons, equipment, radio traffic and signals. Moreover, at least one rehearsal should be done in real time with the anticipated floor plan to avoid losing speed and momentum from confusion or congestion.

MOVEMENT

The third of the operation involves two types of movement. The first, “movement to objective,” is when the team deploys to a staging area close enough to provide an immediate response. From here it is not uncommon to wait for long periods and even abort the intervention should something change.

The second is a “movement to contact,” meaning that its aim is to confront the hostage-taker. It is not uncommon for this maneuver to begin slowly and stealthily but end in a burst of speed to overwhelm a hostage-taker’s ability to harm hostages or implement effective countermeasures.

Of all the phases in the operation, the assault phase is both the most conspicuous and the most critical. Any mistakes made in earlier stages will appear here and the success of the intervention hinges on the team’s ability to recognize, comprehend and adapt to surprise and confusion.

While the first two phases are often done at or near a staging area or field command post, during this phase the team is deployed. Although planning continues and plans are updated when appropriate, major changes are difficult to implement during and following this stage because of the physical separation between the command staff and the deployed team. Furthermore, because this is the phase when most hostage interventions are compromised, it is typically conducted as secretly and as stealthily as possible.

ASSAULT

The assault phase begins when a tactical intervention is imminent. This point is critical in that it begins *not* when the signal to intervene is given but rather when the decision to intervene is made. While command personnel are deeply involved in planning and problem-solving in the previous stages of the operation—and so retain substantial control—once this phase begins, the control of the team lies entirely with the deployed team leader. While the superior commanders retain command of the operation, it is exceptionally rare that they interfere with the sole exception of an “abort” command. There are simply too many contextual factors to provide sufficient situational awareness to control every facet from afar.

Of all the phases in the operation, the assault phase is both the most conspicuous and the most critical. Any mistakes made in earlier stages will appear here and the success of the intervention hinges on the team’s ability to recognize, comprehend and adapt to surprise and confusion. Furthermore, because it necessitates speed and violence of action, it is often highly exciting and will be described in detail in the printed media and repeatedly broadcast in the electronic media. In fact, this phase is usually so visible that those unacquainted often confuse this phase with the entire operation.

WITHDRAWAL

Assaults to rescue hostages are considered “raids” in that there is no intent to retain control of terrain but rather to accomplish some objective and leave. Consequently, the withdrawal is planned from the onset and is just as important as the other phases. This is important with hostages who are active participants but who may be unable to care for themselves; or alternatively, attempt to assist or interfere. Accordingly, the evacuation of the hostages is a major consideration during this phase and may require gurneys, on-site medical assistance, or even physically restraining hostages.

A LAST RESORT

While most hostage recovery operations involving domestic law enforcement allow planning and operations to be conducted according to these phases, even if abbreviated, there is one type that does not. Some hostage situations unfold so rapidly and with such clarity that the need for an immediate intervention is compelling. This type is often referred to by the Latin phrase *in extremis*. The literal meaning of this term is “at the point of death,” but for purposes here it is better understood “as a last resort” or “worst case.” These *in extremis* situations require an immediate deployment approach. Even in these worst-case scenarios, however, much of the complexity can be attenuated with a systematic and methodical approach. ▮

ENDNOTES

1. Alternatively, the term “hostage rescue” is frequently used to describe these interventions but because they may be successfully concluded without a rescue, per se, the broader term “hostage recovery” is preferred to avoid limiting thoughts and ideas or implying methods and procedures.
2. While multiple hostage-takers are not uncommon, for simplicity, clarity and brevity, the singular pronoun is used throughout this article — no further inference is intended.
3. Other types of interventions that would not meet the conventional definition of an “assault” include assisting hostages in escape, defending in place, and so forth.