

Insight and experience from Special Ops officers in the field

A SHARP MIND IS THE WARRIOR'S EDGE



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The firefight had been continuing for more than an hour with more than 550 rounds fired. One officer was dead, sniped by a suspect with a high-powered, scoped rifle from an upper window. Three federal agents were pinned down near the house. One was hiding in the shadow of a small, decorative wall and would soon be exposed when the shadow receded with the rising sun. The suspect was in the second story of a house on a hill and could not fail to miss him once he was discovered. Besides the scoped rifle, the suspect had body armor, a gas mask, automatic weapons, and thousands of rounds of ammunition. He had stated that he would "make Waco look like a picnic." You are the SWAT commander. What do you do?

This is one of several scenarios I sometimes put before my students when I teach. It is all the more poignant because it is not hypothetical. It actually happened. Understandably, few volunteer to jump in and solve the problem. Instead, we talk about questions like, "How do you neutralize a suspect who has commanding terrain and a scoped-rifle?" "What do you use when the suspect has adequate countermeasures for such tried and true weapons as tear gas and handguns?" "How do you rescue the federal agents without exposing more officers to the suspect's fire?" Indeed, even an attempt might reveal their locations to the suspect, and so such a course of action would be an all or nothing venture. The consequences of failure are appalling, and because the students are nearly always veteran police officers, they have no difficulty in imagining them. When the discussions have become too "comfortable," I often change roles and take the position of a plaintiff's attorney. The dialogue quickly becomes controversial, even contentious. In point of fact, there is no "school solution" to these situations and so many are content feeling that because there is no "right" answer, there is also no "wrong" answer.

It is no secret that I have long been critical of much law enforcement tactical training.¹ I have been outspoken in both my teaching and writings. In the medical

field, many law enforcement tacticians would be the functional equivalent of witch doctors. Medical terms such as lavage, dermabrasion, or hemodialysis are no more foreign to them than initiative, tempo, fog or friction. They have little or no understanding of the underlying tactical science and would be hard put to quote a single source, theory or doctrine to justify their decisions. I have often experienced first-hand the brunt of arguments from plaintiff's "experts" who possess all of the credentials and none of the knowledge to make effective and reliable tactical decisions. The fact that juries find them credible at all testifies to law enforcement's superficial understanding and employment of fundamental doctrinal concepts for comparison.

Without exception, every SWAT team in the world requires some minimum level of physical ability. Many agencies provide for on-duty workout time and require periodic testing. Daily I watch SWAT officers going to great lengths to gain and maintain physical abilities and develop prowess in shooting, movement, and stealth—yet good tactics have saved more lives than good marksmanship. After all, the objective is to win, not to fight. Accountants study math, doctors and nurses study medicine, and weather forecasters study meteorology, so why don't tacticians study tactical science? While the problem is pervasive throughout the ranks, it is most acute at the command level. In the words of one of my SWAT commanders,² "Our contribution to any tactical operation is solely from the neck up!"

Predominately, the problem seems to stem from a general lack of awareness that there actually is a system of knowledge covering general truths for reconciling tactical ends with scientific principles. In many agencies, officers desiring to advance in rank must demonstrate some basic knowledge of managing, budgeting, staffing, organizing, and planning, but may not have the faintest inkling of logistics, intelligence, operations, or command and control. Is it any wonder that these people make great managers and poor commanders? It is a bitter irony, that because of their rank, they are also the

most likely to be called upon to handle the largest and most complex tactical operations. I usually illustrate this point when students are struggling with complex tactical scenarios by asking, "What would you give to have Napoleon whispering in your ear, 'Why don't you try this?' or 'I wouldn't do that if I were you.'" Or perhaps Alexander the Great, Sun Tzu, Thucydides, or Frederick the Great? They have each left a legacy of knowledge that is all but untapped by the law enforcement tactical community. It is a gut-wrenching experience listening to a person who has gained respect and acclaim as an administrator, but who has minimal experience, and little skill or knowledge, in the tactical arena, criticizing an operation for which they have only a modicum of understanding.

Since their inception in the mid-1960s, SWAT teams have been charged with the responsibility of safely resolving those situations that are so extraordinarily hazardous, complex or unusual that conventional law enforcement responses are inadequate. As history has shown, the nature of their missions will become even more bizarre and increasingly complex. As law enforcement ramps up for the war on terrorism it is more critical than ever to build upon a solid foundation of science. Command personnel

need to be thoroughly familiar with tactical concepts, principles, axioms and doctrine. Promotional examinations need to include material on tactical science. Professional associations like the National Tactical Officers Association need to be as important on a resume as the International Association of Chiefs of Police. Agencies

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"GOOD TACTICS HAVE SAVED MORE LIVES THAN GOOD MARKSMANSHIP."

need to recognize that the knowledge and skills for handling tactical operations are just as real and just as necessary as those for preparing budgets, managing personnel or organizing programs. They also need to invest as much in education for commanders as in training for the troops. It is time to recognize that the "art of war" is the application of the science. To do less is too horrible to contemplate in a profession that chastens its failures with death. ■

as more than 90 articles on law enforcement subjects. He is a much sought after trainer who has lectured throughout the United States and many other countries.

¹ While I understand the difference between training and education, for simplicity and clarity, the term "training" is intended to be all inclusive.

² This quote, by Lt. Daryl Evans of the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department's Special Enforcement Bureau was used many times over the years I was in charge to justify funding training and education for the higher ranks.

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