

A LESSON IN **TACTICAL SCIENCE**

BY SID HEAL

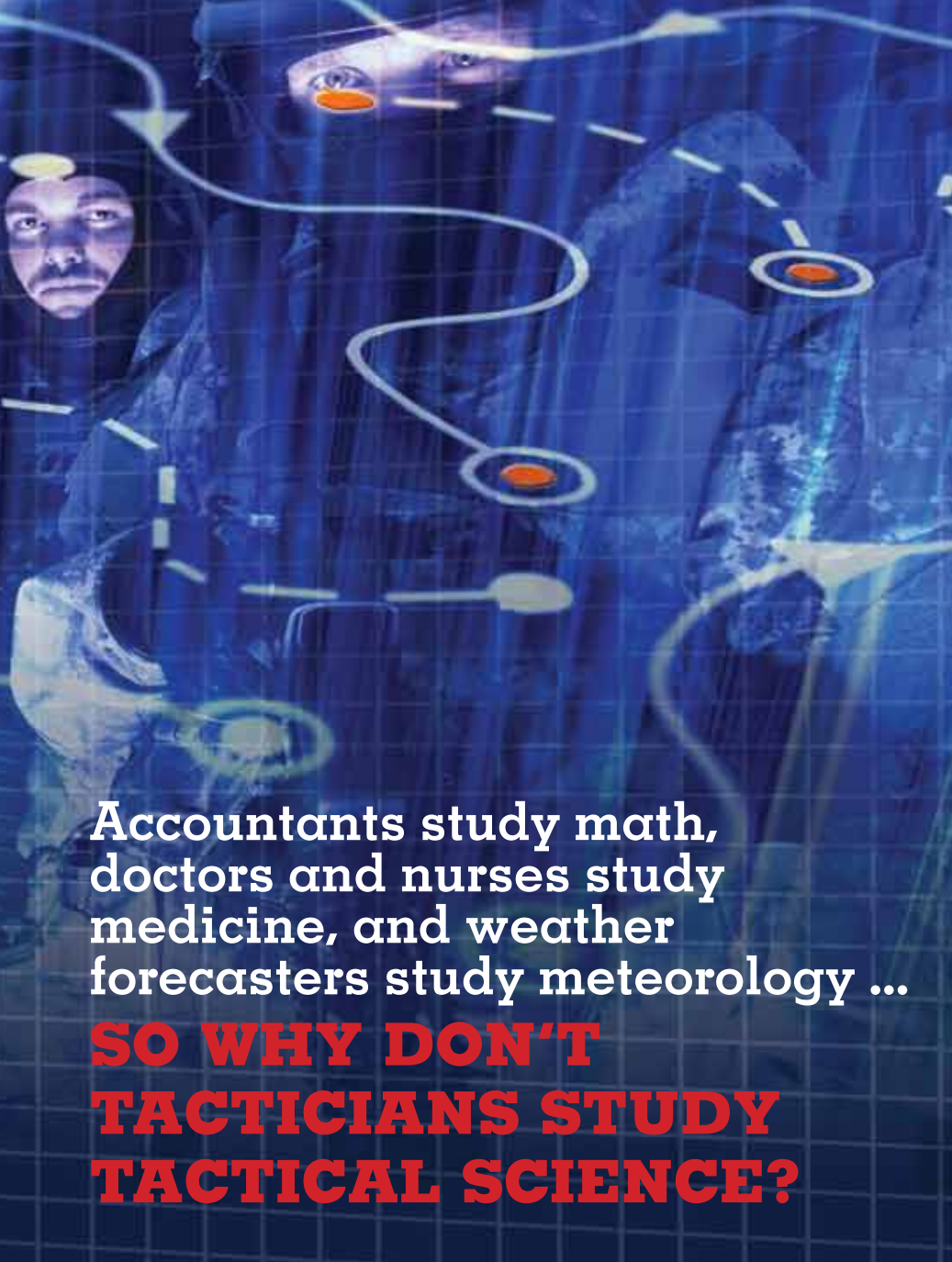
Ask just about anyone about law enforcement tactical fiascoes and they will be quick to cite the raid on the Branch Davidian Compound in Waco, Texas, or perhaps the Ruby Ridge standoff with Randy Weaver and his family in Idaho. They may even describe the fires in Philadelphia after local police attempted to serve arrest warrants on members of the MOVE group—11

died, 60 homes were destroyed, and the city was ordered to pay more than \$25 million in settlements.

Others may describe an event in which their local police were involved, almost certainly a scenario alleging inappropriate force. Regardless of what is described, the scenarios almost always involve allegations of an overreaction of some type. In contrast, consider the following scenarios.

After attempting to serve arrest warrants on a bunch of radical farmers—who, among other things, were accused

of frauds and refusing to pay taxes—agents from the federal government surrounded their farm headquarters near Jordan, Montana, and pleaded with them to surrender. Fearing a repeat of the tragic events at Ruby Ridge, the operation continued for months and the media labeled the conspicuously timid efforts as “Weaver fever.” When the suspects finally surrendered after 81 days, local citizens danced in the streets. The operation remains the longest police “siege” in U.S. history.



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A year later, local police attempted to serve commitment papers on a 51-year-old widow and former nurse living in a house near Roby, Illinois. Relatives claimed she was mentally unstable. For nearly six weeks, she single-handedly held off police. The so-called “Roby Ridge Siege” cost the local authorities nearly a million dollars and gained international attention as protestors picketed the site and neighbors paid her bills and attempted to sneak food to her.

Unlike their comparative equiva-

lents, these incidents are clearly cases of under-reaction, but are they any less tactical fiascos? The ridicule and scorn used to describe them clearly indicates some of the sentiments of the community and serves to undermine the legitimate authority of their government to enforce the laws. The greater question, however, is what is appropriate?

There is no perfect solution to these situations, and therein lays the root of the issue. Because there is no one right answer, many conclude there is also

no wrong answer. The sad, but true, state of affairs is that most law enforcement tacticians are lacking even the most rudimentary understanding of any supporting science for making sound tactical decisions. Many law enforcement tacticians are the functional equivalent of witch doctors in the medical field. To the witch doctor, medical terms such as lavage, dermabrasion or hemodialysis are as unfamiliar as tactical terms like tempo, fog, or friction are to some law enforcement tacticians. They would be hard put to quote a single source, theory or doctrine to justify their decisions. They simply apply what worked last time without any idea of why the preferred course of action in one situation may be a recipe for disaster in another. It is especially disheartening to have the most noble intentions disparaged by a plaintiff’s “expert” who possesses 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 attests to law enforcement’s superficial understanding and employment of fundamental doctrinal concepts that have withstood the test of time and trial.

As the war on terrorism is underway and law enforcement is shouldering the lion’s share of the burden for guarding our communities from attack, it would seem prudent that commanders of tactical operations be fully immersed in the science from which to draw upon for appropriate tactical responses. Referring again to our medical analogy, a patient complaining of stomach pain expects a bona fide medical doctor to be able to tell the difference between indigestion and stomach cancer. When caught early enough and appropriately treated, even potentially terminal illnesses are curable.

Likewise, members of the community have a right to expect law enforcement professionals to be capable of making a similar diagnosis in their specialty, especially an ability to recognize when a tactical operation or emergency response is moving in unanticipated directions and satisfactory outcomes become dubious. 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, and while a strong emphasis is placed on physical ability and prowess with weapons, good tactics have saved more lives than good marksmanship! Why then is this shortcoming so pervasive?

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 supporting scientific principles. In all but the rare exception, officers desiring to advance in rank, especially to a command level, 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. 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 knowledge or understanding in the tactical arena, criticizing an operation for which they have only a minimal amount of comprehension.

So what exactly is tactical science? In the simplest terms, it is the systematized body of knowledge covering the principles and doctrines associated with tactical operations or emergency responses and reconciling scientific knowledge with practical ends. Unlike the “hard” sciences, like physics and mathematics, tactical science more closely resembles the “soft” sciences, like sociology and psychology, because scientific truths cannot be determined to an absolute certainly but instead are limited to a range of likely probabilities. Nevertheless, doctrinal concepts such as objective, mass, maneuver, fog, friction, initiative and tempo go a long way towards elucidating the factors and influences involved in crafting reliable plans and making sound decisions in responding to emergency situations.

Likewise, it is an “applied science” in that the major contribution is not

merely identifying the principles and precepts in play, but rather in applying the knowledge to forecast and influence behaviors and outcomes to enhance a more satisfactory outcome. In this manner, law enforcement tacticians more closely resemble engineers than scientists. The problem, however, is that unlike the military services which teach these subjects as part of an officer’s education, no such requirement exists for law enforcement leadership.

Recognizing this problem, the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department began a 40-hour course in tactical science in 2004. Students are predominately from law enforcement, with as much as 20% of a class consisting of command rank

individuals. This course has attracted students from as far away as Hawaii, Washington, and Illinois, as well as attendees from other countries, most recently three Belgian counter-terrorist experts.

The course assumes no prior knowledge of tactical science or military or even law enforcement experience. Instead, competitive games like chess, checkers, soccer, football, basketball, baseball, and the like, are used to demonstrate how understanding and applying fundamental doctrinal concepts affect favorable resolutions. Among other things, students learn the importance of envisioning an end state, the five inherent factors in any crisis, how to conduct an operational analysis and terrain analysis, maneuvering in time, fighting in five dimensions, as well as the differences and implications of analysis and synthesis, symmetric and asymmetric strategies, plans that are loosely or closely coupled, and many other tactical concepts.

Of particular note is developing a capability for early recognition of operations that are moving away from the norm to prompt more scrutiny and provide for corrective measures. Described as a “miniature war college” for law enforcement, none of these subjects are routinely taught in any law enforcement agency in the United States and the courses have grown steadily in size and frequency.



As the years have passed, students are reporting one successful operation after another. Yet, despite the success of the program, it is far too small and infrequent to have a national impact. The military profession long ago recognized the value of studying tactical science and have established institutions from West Point and Annapolis to the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, England, plus the various service war colleges, to instill the importance and provide a forum for understanding and applying proven tactical principles. In contrast, no equivalent exists anywhere for law enforcement.

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 and the California Association of Tactical Officers, need to be as important on a resume as the International Association of Chiefs of Police. Agencies 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 consider in a profession that chastens its failures with death. ☹

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