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Implementing A Tactical Team For A Smaller  
Police Agency; What If?

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by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The following research paper deals with the author's request to the Webster City Council to implement a tactical response team. The author recognizes a need for such a team even in a smaller police agency. Webster does have a mutual aid agreement with the Houston Police Department to handle threat to life felony situations such as hostage rescue and barricaded subjects. The author is proposing a team that will complement, not replace the Houston SWAT Team. The tactical team proposed would act as a forward security and information gathering team, rather than a rescue team. The actions of this team would benefit the SWAT team by saving them several steps. The author has created a survey and done personal interviews with the Commanders of several large metropolitan SWAT teams to get input for this project. The research project itself will deal specifically with the need for such a team and how it could assist a rescue team like SWAT. Little emphasis will be directed to training costs, equipment needed, or the selection process of the team members. These issues would be addressed in depth if the proposal were accepted by the Webster City Council for further development.

## **INTRODUCTION**

**“WHAT IF?”** - Often used by visionary leaders who want to be prepared for any occurrence. “Okay, but how much is WHAT IF going to cost as opposed to how many times it would occur?” - Often used by the persons who control the purse strings. Not an easy choice to make or an easy argument to overcome when you have to consider most small town budgets. Why then do we need a tactical team in a smaller police agency? The answer can be found in crime statistics and the city government’s resolve that preparation for what might happen far outweighs hoping that something bad won’t happen.

The following is a proposal to the City Council of Webster, Texas requesting permission to establish a tactical team to deal with high risk situations. High risk situations may best be described as; “An incident involving an act of violence in which a police officer is at a distinct disadvantage and subject to extreme danger. Such situations may involve sniper attacks, ambush attacks, barricaded criminals, riots, demonstrations, civil disorder, and terrorist activities” (Tafoya, 1975, p8).

The City of Webster is fortunate that these situations are not the norm. Webster has a low violent crime rate compared to other cities. The Webster Police Department is a visible and responsive force with an average overall response time of three to four minutes (Barker, 1995).

The popular belief is that this rapid response time increases the potential that criminals will be caught during the commission of crime. If a criminal is caught in the act, they may choose to fight, flee, or take a barricaded position, possibly with a hostage. A specially trained and equipped tactical team could be of benefit in this situation. When innocent bystanders are involved, the potential exists for high risk or threat to life situations. Some type of tactical team is needed to act quickly and with singularity of purpose to deal with high risk situations. The term singularity of purpose means a group of individuals acting as a single, well organized, and well disciplined unit (Wingerson, 1995). This research proposal shall be comprised of information which will be provided to the Webster City Council. Several sources shall be cited including but not limited to;

1. Interviews with the Commanders of the Houston, Pasadena, Galveston, San Antonio, and Austin SWAT teams.
2. Law enforcement periodicals such as the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, Police Chief magazine, and the Criminal Justice Reference Service.

The focus of the tactical team being proposed is not to implement a full scale SWAT/Rescue team like the ones found in larger cities like Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio. The team proposed would complement SWAT by acting as a forward perimeter and information (intelligence) gathering team prior to the arrival of SWAT/Rescue.

Only in emergency situations would the proposed team attempt a rescue.

Complementing SWAT would not be the team's only function. Such a team could be used to serve high risk felony warrants, conduct narcotics raids, and assist the patrol force in building or ground searches for escaped or elusive suspects that are believed armed (Olin, 1980, p20-25).

## **HISTORICAL ISSUES**

The first tactical team was established as a direct result of the Watts Riots in Los Angeles, California in 1965. A police supervisor in reviewing the incident noticed some shocking details. The most significant revelation being the lack of scene control, little or no established perimeter, and excessive, uncontrolled use of police firearms. Lack of organization and training were issues that were specifically addressed following the Watts Riots. The S.W.A.T. (Special Weapons and Tactics) Team was organized as a counter-sniper, counter-terrorist team to deal with high risk situations and war protesters (Vietnam). Over the years, larger cities like Houston have created tactical teams and tailored the operation(s) to fit that city's needs. Houston for example utilizes its SWAT Team for high risk situations including but not limited to;

1. riots,
2. hostage situations,
3. barricaded subjects,
4. snipers,
5. serving felony warrants,
6. narcotics raids,
7. conventions,
8. dignitary protection (Walker,M 1993).

The following are the units within HPD SWAT;

1. THE COMMAND POST - The first HPD SWAT Officer on the scene begins to select a site for the Command Post. Once the ranking SWAT Official arrives this location may be moved depending upon the circumstances. The Command Post (C/P) is where the ranking SWAT Official directs the operation.
2. NEGOTIATOR - Works in the Command Post. Responsible for establishing an open line of communication with the hostile subject.
3. HISTORIAN - Works in the Command Post. Responsible for logging all information received, all radio traffic, basically responsible for a chronological account of the entire operation.
4. MARKSMAN - The first member of the SWAT Team to get into position to deal with the situation and the last to leave when it is over. The eyes and ears of the SWAT Team. Provides cover for all other units.
5. INNER PERIMETER - Usually a five (5) person team responsible for establishing a close perimeter (circle) around the location. Other duties includes direction of evacuation activities, containment of person(s) leaving the location, or if need be assisting the Rescue Team.
6. RESCUE TEAM - Responsible for entering the location to effect a rescue if negotiations fail or if the use of the marksman is not feasible.

The Inner Perimeter and Rescue Teams each have a Team Leader, Scout, Point Man, and Rear Guard. Prior to making entry into a location, the Team Leader and Scout of the Rescue Team do a complete surveillance of the location they may have to enter. The Team Leader and Scout gather as much information about the location as they can which they transfer to the Command Post.

The Tactical Team being proposed for Webster would be called the Special Response Team or (SRT). The SRT would serve in a capacity similar to the Inner Perimeter Team of HPD SWAT. The SRT would also gather intelligence information for Houston SWAT that could be turned over to the Rescue Team. The rationale being that HPD SWAT will come out under the right circumstances (only if a felony has occurred), but it will take time for HPD SWAT to mobilize such a large unit and get to our location. By using our SRT Team, Webster could save HPD SWAT several steps prior to their arrival as well as providing valuable information to them upon their arrival. The SRT would be based in the City of Webster. It would perform its assigned duties prior to the arrival of HPD SWAT. Once HPD SWAT arrived and took control of the scene, the SRT could be relieved of their posts and sent to the Command Post for debriefing.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

A three page survey was created and sent to the Commanders of the previously mentioned SWAT teams requesting their input. Included in the survey was an overview of what the author intended as the focus of the proposed Special Response Team. The responses requested dealt with;

1. The SWAT commander's opinion of the idea in general,
2. Any reservations or objections the SWAT commander would have,
3. The minimum number of training hours such a team would require on a monthly basis,
4. Whether or not a marksman would be required,
5. Should the Special Response Team attempt to establish negotiations or await the arrival of SWAT Negotiator,
6. Historical data on the SWAT team surveyed.



A copy of the survey is included in this paper (see Appendix A). The general consensus of all commanders interviewed was positive in favor of having such a team created. The minimum number of training hours recommended by the commanders was between eight and sixteen hours per month. Most of the larger metropolitan SWAT teams are used for hostage rescue, dignitary protection, high risk warrant service, narcotics raids, and riots. Most of the teams have been in existence from ten to twenty years. The Commanders of two of the teams responding sent copies of their minimum physical requirements and both cited the Cooper Clinic standards of the 70th percentile. Members of most teams are selected based on physical requirements, SWAT school, obstacle course, shooting course, disciplinary record, driving record, non-smoker, drug screen, and psychological fitness.

The Houston PD SWAT team has at its disposal the latest technology and instructors from around the world including but not limited to the US military (Walker, M 1993). Houston PD offers SWAT training to outside agencies as does the Pasadena SWAT Team. Houston PD SWAT offers a Full-Certificate and Administrative Certificate in their school. A Full Certificate indicates the student participated in all training both physical and classroom. An Administrative Certificate indicates the student had the option of not participating in the more strenuous physical aspects of the school and concentrated on the management/leadership aspects of the school.

In SWAT school the physical requirement is high, training hours are long, and the discipline is strict. The SWAT Basic schools last five days and officers attending are taught discipline, teamwork and safety. The main focus of the school is; Don't quit, do it as a team, be prepared for anything, do it well, and do it with safety (Walker,M 1993).

In reviewing articles on implementing tactical teams for smaller agencies it was recommended by the SWAT Commanders that the team consist of from five (5) to seven (7) members that train together on a regular basis, usually monthly. Each agency has an established written policy and procedure manual dealing strictly with the tactical operation and requirements. Equipping smaller agency tactical teams requires imagination and creativity because the costs can be substantial. In researching this project it was found that two components are essential to the operation of a SWAT team. These are the negotiator and the marksman or sniper. The negotiators are responsible for attempting to bring about a safe conclusion to an incident by talking to the barricaded suspect.

Research shows that almost 90 % of these situations are resolved without gunfire or injuries (Higgins, 1988, p 42). Marksman or snipers must have the best equipment and training available due to the roll they play in a high risk situation. The marksman is the first person to get into position and the last person to leave. The marksman must be psychologically capable of making a shot with a shoulder fired weapon from distances up to several hundred yards at a target sometimes no larger than a human head with an innocent person only inches away.

The marksman's equipment must work or the lives of the team members and/or the hostage could be at stake. Most high risk situations are resolved safely, but take a considerable amount of time to resolve, usually around four to five hours (Higgins 1988, p42). SWAT members must be on-call around the clock so there is a need to have several persons trained as SWAT officers to allow others to rest. Most SWAT personnel have vehicles assigned to them at all times so they can respond. Their gear is either kept in their assigned vehicle or stored in a single location at their respective agency for quick access. All SWAT teams have some type of mobile command post and rescue vehicle, usually an armored vehicle of some sort. In order to be prepared for most situations a SWAT team needs special uniforms, first aid supplies, gas masks, telephones, audio/video equipment, weapons, lighting, rescue equipment, battering rams, ladders, rappelling gear, non-lethal restraint/distraction devices, body armor, two way radios, food, water, and fowl weather gear.

Once in place, unless relieved by someone, a SWAT member cannot leave their position until the operation is concluded and the scene declared secure. Following the operation, the SWAT team meets back at their respective agency for a debriefing to discuss the positive and negative aspects of the operation.

## **DISCUSSION OF RELEVANT ISSUES**

There are two major issues relevant to this proposal; drugs and the local economy.

Drugs are an ever increasing problem in today's society. It takes money and equipment to combat drugs. An article in the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, states; "According to the National Crime Prevention Council, drug dealers are leaving urban regions at a rapid pace and moving their trade in rural areas" (1994, p 5). This has caused some smaller agencies to create drug teams that train together on raid practices, firearms, search procedures, and other drug related issues. In preparing for drug-related raids or other barricaded situations, the police at least have the advantage of some prior intelligence before making their move. Another issue not yet discussed is perhaps the most dangerous to deal with because it involves persons acting out some type of manic episode due to loss of jobs, family problems or other stressful situations. In some cases, these persons are not criminals until they carry out an act of violence. Some persons are suicidal and may be a serious threat to those around them. Domestic violence cases have evolved into murder/suicides, kidnappings, and barricaded situations. The SRT could respond quickly to these scenarios, set up a close perimeter and evacuate as many innocent persons from the area as possible. The purpose behind establishing a perimeter other than evacuating persons is to immobilize the situation to one place.

If a situation is allowed to travel from one place to another, there is a greater potential for losing control of the situation and involving more innocent persons. SWAT commanders interviewed all agreed that you want a situation to end where it started. Only in extreme cases would a suspect be allowed to travel from one place to another. The longer a person is kept at the same location, the more intelligence can be gathered for that location. If the situation is allowed to go somewhere else, the process basically starts over from scratch.

Through quick response and/or negotiation, around 90% of all the above incidents resulted in the surrender or apprehension of the hostile persons(s) (Higgins, 1988, p42). By comparison, of these same reported incidents, only about 2% resulted in death or serious injury to the hostages or enforcement personnel. The average time of each incident was between four and five hours (Higgins, 1988 p 42).

As far as budgetary constraints, the City of Webster has a strong economy. Through the years, in anticipation of creating such a team, weapons and other tactical supplies have been accumulated through budget requests and donations from police support groups. Six (6) officers from the department have attended SWAT Basic schools at Houston and Pasadena as well as firearms instructor schools, officer survival schools, and tactical management schools.

To effectively outfit a team like the one being proposed, the following areas need to be addressed; training, uniforms, and equipment. Most of the equipment mentioned above is already in place. Some items can be fabricated at little or no cost while others are military surplus items that can be obtained at no cost. Some items are currently in the Criminal Investigations Unit inventory such as portable lighting, telephones, ladders, and audio/visual equipment. The CID Crime Scene van can be utilized to transport the equipment to a scene until a designated transport vehicle for the SRT and its gear can be obtained. There are surplus military vehicles available at little or no cost for such a purpose.

It has been suggested that Webster join the local CART Team comprised of League City, Friendswood, Alvin, and Pearland. An issue here is civil liability. According to Franscell (1996):

“Now we see a substantial increase in these lawsuits not just directed against the individual tortfeasor and the public entity but against the task force in an attempt to impose civil liability on the basis that it is a person under the eyes of the law. In addition, there has been a marked increase in civil suits involving other officers from other jurisdictions who did not directly cause the injury or damage to the Plaintiff. The pursuit of such actions against other officers has met with surprising success.

The CART Team is patterned after a full scale SWAT/Rescue team and does not meet the criteria established for the Special Response Team being proposed.

The focus of the SRT would be to quickly respond and establish a close perimeter to the location, evacuate persons within the perimeter, and begin gathering intelligence information that could be turned over to SWAT upon its arrival.

Unlike SWAT or the CART team whose personnel would be required to remain at the scene until conclusion, once the SRT was debriefed at the Command Post, the SRT could be released from the scene.

The Criminal Investigations Division, when planning to serve a high risk warrant or make a drug raid, could utilize the SRT to make entry first and secure the area before Detectives entered to preserve and collect evidence. If an escaped or elusive person is believed holed up in a building or heavily wooded area where the chances of ambush are great, the SRT could lead the search effort.

## **CONCLUSION**

This proposal was written to demonstrate the need for a tactical team that would complement, not supplement a SWAT/Rescue team. It is felt the Special Response Team (SRT) would be an asset to the department because of the variety of situations it would be able to handle. The SRT could handle high risk warrant service, barricaded persons, building and ground searches, and assist the patrol division during civil disorders. It is not recommended that Webster join a unit such as the CART Team because with all the perceived benefits of additional manpower and equipment, the fact remains that you are dealing with four or five city governments that may change personnel every election year. What one city government thinks is needed now may not be what the in-coming administration thinks

when they take office. The civil liability issue has already been mentioned in the Relevant Issues section.

### **CONCLUDING STATEMENT**

This proposal was made with considerable planning and research as well as years of experience. As a member of the Webster Police Department for the last nineteen years, I was at or in charge of most of the high risk situations that occurred. In most cases, the bad guys went to jail and were convicted or were captured shortly thereafter. In those nineteen years, not one police officer from Webster or any other agency present was ever treated for other than minor injuries.

Webster is a safe place to live and it is through the efforts of the dedicated men and women of the Webster Police Department that make it possible. By allowing the creation of the Special Response Team, you the members of city government have a chance to make a good thing even better.



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