

LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SPECIAL WEAPONS AND TACTICS TEAMS:

"NECESSITY, THE MOTHER OF INVENTION!"

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INTRODUCTION

Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams have existed for some time in law enforcement. The earliest formation is attributed to the Los Angeles Police Department in 1965.¹ SWAT teams have been the subject of television series, high media publicity, community misconceptions and animosity from fellow police officers.

Only through education can the misconceptions and prejudices be corrected. This student's intent, through this paper, is to provide a brief history and review of the literature regarding the formation of special units designed to deal with extraordinary law enforcement circumstances. Included will be examples of municipal, federal and international jurisdiction models.

AN EXISTING NEED

Watts Riots

August 11, 1965, Los Angeles, California. On a hot summer evening a young Negro male was stopped by the California Highway Patrol for speeding and suspicion of driving while intoxicated. A large crowd gathered that knew the youth and yelled at the patrol officer to release the man. The man was arrested, and the patrol officer called for additional law enforcement officers

to handle the growing crowd and help remove the arrested man from the scene. Additional officers arrived, but confusion was developing and a bystander was struck with a highway patrol officer's baton. One young Negro woman, accused of spitting at the officers, was pulled from the crowd and dragged into the street, only to escape and return to the crowd. After the police departed, the crowd, upset with the perceived police brutality, began hurling rocks at passing cars, beating white motorists, overturning cars and setting them on fire.

By the next morning the crowd had dispersed due to the efforts of community leaders. However later that evening violence again broke out and this time was accompanied by looting, firebombing and sniper fire. Five days of rioting followed which saw three police officers killed and ninety injured by sniper fire. Militant snipers were also responsible for the injuries of thirty-six firefighters, ten National Guardsmen and twenty-three government employees. As a result of the riot 34 persons were killed, 1,032 were injured and 3,952 were arrested.²

Police Chief William Parker conducted an internal investigation of the urban warfare that had occurred. Accounts of incidents, such as the stand-off between police and a single sniper in a house, who was found to have escaped after police fired over 4,000 rounds at

him, showed that the Los Angeles police were poorly equipped to handle such circumstances.

Chief Parker assigned to Lt. John G. Nelson the task of developing police alternatives for special threat situations, particularly snipers. Thus, the special weapons and tactics concept came about with the formation of the "anti-sniper unit."³

University Of Texas Tower

August 1, 1966, University of Texas, Austin, Texas. Charles Whitman, upon being asked what he wanted, violently strikes receptionist, Edna Townsley, across the face with his rifle butt and fires a blast into her unconscious body, killing her. Seconds after hiding her body Whitman is met by Don Walden and Cheryl Botts as they exit onto the observation deck of the University Tower, twenty-seven stories over the campus. Whitman greets them cheerfully and asks them to leave the tower. The couple complies, having noticed the red-black stain on the floor. Later they are to learn that the stain was the blood of Mrs. Townsley. So began the random taking and sparing of lives by a twenty-five year old Marine Corps sniper.⁴

Charles Whitman, depressed over his parent's recent separation, had killed his wife and mother prior to climbing the university tower with his arsenal. He brought with him a .30 caliber army carbine, a .35

caliber pump rifle, a 12 gauge shotgun, two pistols and his weapon of choice a 6.1 mm. sporting rifle with a 4-power telescopic lens, the perfect sniping instrument for a highly military-trained sharpshooter.⁵

Whitman had prepared for that morning by renting a dolly to carry his footlocker, which contained his weapons and a large supply of ammunition. In addition, Whitman packed food, water, toilet paper, a transistor radio and gasoline, all of which indicated that he had every intention of holding off police for an extended period.⁶

From his protected position, Whitman shot forty-six people, killing sixteen. Over 100 policemen attempted to stop the madman only to be wounded or in Officer Billy Speeds' case, lose his life.⁷ Police remained helpless, and even~~x~~ their attempts to rescue the wounded were thwarted by the sniper who shot anyone approaching a victim, or victims, who showed signs of life. As a result, some victims lay on the hot pavement under the 96-degree sun for over an hour. Eventually armored trucks of the type used to service banks were used by police to rescue victims.⁸

Police attempts to stop the terror were largely the independent actions of individual officers, including those who returned fire armed with their personal hunting rifles and a pilot's efforts to fly a police officer close enough to the tower for a shot at

the sniper. The efforts proved ineffective, because Whitman was well protected from police fire below by the tower walls and he used superior firepower to drive the light airplane away. Only through an independent and desperate charge by Officer Romero Martinez, who climbed the tower, exchanged gunfire with the sniper and killed Whitman, was the reign of terror stopped.⁹

Austin Police Chief Robert Miles said in an interview:

Until Martinez went into action, there was no specific plan for capturing Whitman. In a situation like that it all depended on independent action taken by the officers.¹⁰

Internal investigation into the incident revealed that the Austin Police Department had no weapons capable of returning effective fire; that civilians had greatly interfered in the rescue operations; that no central command was established; and there was a lack of planning and cooperation among responding agencies. As a result, development and training of a unit to correct the problems, currently known as the "Special Missions Team," was initiated.¹¹

Howard Johnson Incident, New Orleans

January 7, 1973, downtown New Orleans, Louisiana. Firefighters respond to a reported fire at the "Howard Johnson's Hotel" in downtown New Orleans, an 18 story structure set afire by an arsonist. At 11:00 a.m. firefighter Tim Ursin is shot through the arm by an

unseen assailant from the hotel's rooftop. The police are summoned. Within minutes the building is surrounded, and the dead bodies of a desk clerk and a hotel guest are discovered. Before the thirty-six hour stand-off between a sniper and police ends, twenty-two people will be wounded, and seven more, including three police officers, will be killed.¹²

There is no doubt that Mark James Robert Essex, a black, twenty-three year old, dishonorably discharged Navy veteran was responsible for the deaths and injuries to police and citizens, alike, that day in New Orleans. What remains a mystery is whether this sniper worked alone or was assisted by as many as three other gunmen. Police and firemen would report that other assailants were seen firing upon them, and witnesses would describe two different black males shooting helpless victims inside the hotel.¹³

Responding police, with no organized plan for action, suffered heavy losses as two police officers, Paul Persigo and Phil Coleman, were shot and killed immediately upon their arrival. Police attempts to stop the terrorist would again be defeated, when the only police official leading a planned assault, Police Deputy Superintendent Louis Sirgo, is killed by the sniper as a small team of officers charged the stairwell. For nine more hours, as the gunman fired on the city, police would not attempt another organized plan of attack.¹⁴

In the confusion that followed, 150 officers of the New Orleans Police Department were joined by members of the Orleans Parish Sheriff's Office, the Jefferson and St. Bernard Sheriff Offices, the U.S. Treasury Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. No formal lines of communication existed between these agencies, and it was only through the independent effort of a few officers and a Marine helicopter pilot that one sniper, Mark Essex (the only suspect caught), was gunned down on the rooftop.¹⁵

Under the belief that other gunmen remained in the hotel, police administrators, who had had no practical experience or training in heavily barricaded and armed confrontations, decided to wait out the surrender of any remaining suspects. When police finally searched the building some sixteen hours later, they failed to find any other snipers.¹⁶

The danger to the public now removed, police speculated on how the additional snipers escaped. Police Superintendent Clarence Giarrusso stated to the news media:

Either there was only one, or another got away. The speculation might run the gamut all the way from negligence on the part of the police to a superbrain on the part of the sniper.¹⁷

The sealing off was one of the first moves made after Essex was isolated, so anyone trying to escape had to get through police guards. And some of the men are suggesting that maybe the sniper got past them.¹⁸

Both the New Orleans Police Department and the FBI, aware of their shortcomings in dealing with crimes of this nature, instituted special units for such incidents. The FBI developed an anti-sniper course for internal use and for outside agencies interested in such training.¹⁹

The three incidents cited, the Watts Riots, the University of Texas Tower and the New Orleans Howard Johnson snipings have one thing in common, traditional responses by law enforcement proved to be inadequate to handle the situations. Necessity now required the formation of specially trained units to deal with "high risk situations."

THE SPECIAL WEAPONS AND TACTICS TEAM CONCEPT

High Risk Situations

William Lee Tafoya, project manager of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, 1975 described a "high risk situation" 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.²⁰

Occurrences of such incidents became more and more frequent during the late 1960s and 70s. In addition to the previously mentioned tragedies, the period found law

enforcement dealing with:

- The assassinations of the Kennedy's and Martin Luther King
- The barricaded siege of Wounded Knee, South Dakota
- Symbionese Liberation Army's standoff with the Los Angeles Police Department
- Riots and demonstrations on college campuses
- Thirty-two confirmed ambush attacks against police²¹ across the nation by the Black Liberation Army

These are but a few of the incidents, but they are cited as being the most likely known to the reader.

Of the "high risk situations," two types are most commonly encountered: (1) the ambush attack; and (2) the barricaded criminal. Ambushes are characterized by the unprovoked, surprise attacks on the victims. They most often involve snipings, kidnappings and direct physical assaults. The barricaded criminal is perhaps the most difficult of situations for law enforcement. The suspect has chosen an area with limited access but protected from police units. From this stronghold the suspect can fire on police without exposing himself to their return-fire. Suspects may barricade themselves as part of a planned strategy or out of necessity, resulting from a failed escape after commission of a crime.²²

While each of the "high risk situations" is different, the primary goal of law enforcement agencies

is the same, to protect the lives and property of the innocent and effect the arrest of the criminals. The best way to meet these objectives is to employ personnel having specialized training in such matters.

The Special Weapons and Tactics Team (SWAT)

No one would expect a police officer, untrained in such matters to disarm a bomb, because the risk involved is too great. Police administrators, seeing "high risk situations" handled by the average patrol officer as being equally dangerous, have formed the concept that officers, using teamwork and highly coordinated efforts, would be best suited for these occasions.

The Los Angeles Police Department in 1965, borrowing tactics used by the U.S. military, formed the Special Weapons and Tactics Team, (SWAT) a group of officers trained in anti-sniper and assault techniques. These officers received extensive training in scouting, camouflage and concealment, armed patrol movements, use of a variety of weapons, rappelling, use of chemical agents and first aid. This initial schooling was followed by regular training and practice sessions to ensure a high spirit of teamwork and expertise.²³

In response to their own experiences, the larger cities of New York and Washington, D.C. soon began developing similar units to deal with the extraordinary

circumstances of the violent era of the 1970s. On the Federal level both the U.S. Marshall's Office and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) established SWAT teams. The Marshall's Office creates the Special Operations Group (SOG), after periods of civil unrest in the late 1960s, and the FBI started an anti-sniper team, later to become known as the Hostage Rescue Team (HRT), after the "Wounded Knee Incident" of South Dakota in March of 1973.²⁴

Though different in form, each agency used a small group of team members in a coordinated response to emergencies. The size and design of the group was such that the smallest unit, known as a five man team, could be used alone in a limited response or with other five man teams to form squads for a larger, more demanding assignment.²⁵ Instrumental in the SWAT concept was the skill and teamwork of the working unit; the five man team.

Team Design

Based on military examples the team consists of five members: the team leader, a marksman, an observer, a scout and a rear guard. Some larger agencies have as many as eight members on a team, which provides sufficient cover for all team members, yet remaining small enough in size for speed and efficiency.²⁶

Within the team each member has an area of

responsibility. The team leader is charged with planning, organizing and leading specific tactics employed by his team. He is responsible for communicating intelligence information to the tactical commander. The marksman is responsible for providing long range anti-sniper coverage and fire support at close ranges. The observer, working closely with the marksman, provides spotting for targets, intermediate range defense and radio communication. It is the scout's responsibility to select the route to the team's objective and provide close range security and firepower. The rear guard is responsible for team security and additional close range firepower. Additional members usually serve as observers and marksmen, who provide coverage and intelligence gathering.²⁷

The formation of a team, alone, will not solve the problem of "high risk situations." Tafoya in his article titled "Special Weapons and Tactics," written for The Police Chief magazine in 1975, addressed this issue:

An automatic rifle and flak jacket do not a SWAT team make. In other words excellence cannot be achieved on a casual basis nor does it depend entirely on sophisticated equipment. For these reasons the SWAT concept emphasizes training, attitude, confidence, teamwork, intelligence, controlled use of firepower, and self-control.

These concepts cannot be emphasized too strongly. The success of a SWAT team should be measured by the number of lives saved and the

number of high risk situations handled in which shots were not fired.²⁸

However the team is designed, of paramount importance to its formal functions or level of authoritative jurisdiction, is the need for continuous training and professionalism in its service.

JURISDICTIONAL MODELS OF FUNCTION

Municipal - Grand Prairie Police Tactical Team

In 1970, using funds made available through the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA), members of the Grand Prairie Police Department trained in special response circumstances involving civil disorder. This first "Alert Unit" consisted of four officers, using riot gear supplied by the Justice Department. In 1976, a "Tactical Unit" was created with ten officers primarily to serve warrants and to engage barricaded subjects, who performed such duties in addition to their regular duties, using personal equipment and a small amount of military surplus items bought by the department.²⁹

The Republican Convention of 1984 in neighboring Dallas, renewed the department's concern for a special unit that could deal with extraordinary circumstances and future "high risk situations." That year a \$33,000 special budget expanded the unit to its present size, resulting in the formation of the "Tactical Division."³⁰

The Grand Prairie Police Tactical Division is a unit comprised of two teams, each team consisting of six entry personnel, two snipers, two spotters and a team leader. The two teams, together with a negotiating unit, are supervised by the Tactical Commander, who falls under the immediate command of the Deputy Chief of Field Operations and the ultimate authority of the Chief of Police.³¹

Officers serve in the division voluntarily, in addition to their regular assignments. Selection is based upon successful completion and ranking of applicants based upon the following criteria:

1. Written application
2. Evidence of firearm proficiency
3. Review of disciplinary actions
4. Past and current supervisors recommendations
5. Oral review board
6. Physical agility course
7. Psychological exam

Once selected, the officer undertakes basic tactical training and thereafter continues to train with the teams in bi-monthly practice sessions, which are designed to increase his or her abilities, promote teamwork and ensure his or her continued ability to remain calm and use problem solving techniques in tense situations.³²

Officers are assigned to an A Team and B Team. On

a rotating basis each team is "on call" 24 hours a day for one week, during which the team members remain available for emergency calls to service. Calls to emergency service involve "high risk situations," such as:

- Barricaded suspects
- Sniper incidents
- Hostage takings
- Felony warrant service with anticipated threat of deadly force from the suspect

In addition to these emergency situations the Tactical Division provides detailed, planned service in:

- Narcotic search warrants
- Civil disorder
- VIP protection
- Any situation prescribed by the Chief of Police³³

While this last area leaves a lot to the imagination this student has seen the unit used in smaller numbers of two or four to provide security at election tabulations, thwart attempted suicides and provide robbery stake-outs.

This student has had the opportunity to serve in the Tactical Division since 1985 and now is privileged to serve as the leader of B Team. He has had many assignments as a police officer but by far considers his work with the tactical teams the most challenging and rewarding.

Federal - Federal Bureau of Investigations SWAT and
Hostage Rescue Teams

After having actively participated in several incidents, including the New Orleans snipings in 1973 and the Wounded Knee siege the same year, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) created the "anti-sniper unit," mentioned earlier. In 1974 the FBI created regional SWAT teams for enforcement in cases of original jurisdiction and to assist local agencies which are not equipped to handle "high risk situations." Designed similarly to the Los Angeles Police SWAT team, the FBI's regional units are comprised of special agents, who volunteer for the duty in addition to their regular assignments.³⁴

Besides responding to emergency situations, these regional units conduct training sessions in SWAT techniques for local agencies. This student attended one of these sessions, "FBI Basic SWAT," in Marshall, Texas, in October of 1987. The course, one of the finest he's attended, was instructed by Special Agents Robert Butler and Thomas Yannessa from the Dallas field office.

With increasing acts of terrorism directed against U.S. governmental agencies and their employees, in 1982 the FBI formed the Hostage Rescue Team (HRT) to effect safe release of those caught in terrorist acts. This fifty-member team, based at Quantico, Virginia,

specializes in the use of weapons and tactics in siege or hostage incidents. Members are highly trained in hostage negotiations, firearm proficiency, emergency medical procedures and the use of diversion and entry techniques. The HRT has seen service at the Los Angeles Olympic Games, the 1984 and 1988 Democratic and Republican conventions, the Statue of Liberty Rededication, the Pan American Games in Indianapolis, the 1987 Cuban uprising in the Atlanta prisons and the Seoul Olympic Games.³⁵

Though not highly publicized, the HRT has proven successful in 54 preventive strikes against terrorists since 1983. These include:

1. Arrests of a pro-Khomeini group about to set fire to a Seattle, Washington, theater in 1983
2. Capture of a Libyan-linked gang during their purchase of a rocket intended for use at Chicago's O'Hare Airport in 1985
3. 1986 arrests of five Sikh terrorists, who conspired to bomb an Air India flight out of JFK Airport in New York³⁶

Within the FBI and available to assist the HRT are three analytical units that provide invaluable information. The Bomb Data Center collects and distributes details on bombings by terrorist groups. The Special Operations and Research Unit (SOAR) provides tactical and psychological insights into the terrorist mind. Finally the Terrorist Research and Analytical Center (TRAC) studies terrorist activity and suggests

likely future targets of attack in the U.S. and at U.S. installations abroad.³⁷

The FBI, effective in domestic-federal enforcement, has found it difficult to pursue terrorist attacks against American citizens and assets abroad. The problems of access, jurisdiction and national sovereignty have created a need for an International response to the "high risk situations" of terrorism.

International - United States Army's Special Operations
Command: Delta Force

October 1977, President Jimmy Carter upon learning of the successful rescue of hostages upon a Lufthansa jet by the German anti-terrorist unit Grenzschutzgruppe 9 (GSG9), authorized the formation of an American anti-terrorist unit, which formally brought into service a training project, that had been on-going for the previous two years: 1st Special Forces Operations Detachment-Delta, more commonly known as Delta Force.³⁸

Delta Force, a counter-terrorist and rescue unit specializing in tactics to deal with kidnappings and aircraft highjackings, was the brainchild of Colonel Charles Beckwith. Beckwith, a Special Forces commander with the U.S. Army, borrowed from the British Special Air Service, a unit in which he served for a year, a design to employ a small (by military standards) unit of soldiers, who are trained to intervene in terrorist attacks against its U.S. citizens, anywhere in the

International community.³⁹

Beckwith's unit consisted of 1200 men, who previously had been Green Berets, divided into 16-man troops who could operate in four 4-man teams or eight 2-man patrols. These teams or patrols place emphasis on speed and flexibility in carrying out their assignments. Team members were trained to perfection in 25 basic skills, which included navigation, firearm use, explosives, parachuting, stealth and emergency medicine. In addition, the unit was trained in the use of stun grenades, special firearms for use in aircraft, entry techniques and bomb disposal. Overall, additional training courses for the already highly trained Green Berets lasted a total of 19 weeks.⁴⁰

In April 1980, Colonel Beckwith was called upon by President Carter to utilize his "Delta Force" to rescue 53 American hostages held at the U.S. Embassy in Teheran. Despite his earlier estimation that five years of training and organization would be required to establish Delta Force as the epitome of SWAT teams, only three years into the period, Beckwith accepted "Operation Eagle's Claw."⁴¹

A logistical and planning nightmare, the mission included such problems as the fact that Iran was only 300 miles from the Russian border and further surrounded by Afghanistan and Pakistan, nations not entirely supportive of the United States. This made it necessary

for the rescue team to perform complicated re-fueling procedures before reaching the targeted embassy, the aspect of the operation which would be its downfall. Secondly, there was no intelligence information available, since the Central Intelligence Agency's few agents were among the captured Americans. Finally, once at the embassy, Delta Force would have been required simultaneously to assault fourteen separate buildings spread across twenty-seven acres.⁴²

April 25, 1980, at 2:10 a.m. in the desert 260 miles south of the U.S. Embassy in Teheran, Colonel Beckwith reluctantly was forced to abandon the mission due to the mechanical failure of two helicopters. Tragedy was added to disappointment during the evacuation, when a Sea Stallion helicopter collided with a C-130 transport plane. The resulting explosion caused the death of eight crew-members on the two aircraft. Carrying their wounded, a grief stricken Delta Force returned home. Beckwith later recalled, "I sat down and cried, and the tears were of frustration and rage."⁴³

Most Americans remember watching the news reports of that courageous attempt to rescue the hostages. Many felt a great pride that the government would not stand by helplessly as American citizens were victimized by terrorists.

In later congressional hearings set to explore the failed operation and to learn from its mistakes, Colonel

Beckwith stated:

In Iran we had an ad hoc affair. We went out, found bits and pieces, people and equipment, brought them together occasionally and then asked them to perform a highly complex mission. The parts all performed, but they didn't necessarily perform as a team.

My recommendation is to put together an organization which contains everything it will ever need. An organization which would include Delta, the Rangers, Navy SEALs, Air Force pilots, its own staff, its own support people, its own aircraft and helicopters. And give it sufficient time to recruit, assess, and train its people. Otherwise we are not serious about combating terrorism.⁴⁴

The United States Government was serious about combating terrorism, and based upon Beckwith's recommendation, it formed the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). Within this command Delta Force serves as the SWAT team, charged with physically rescuing hostages and capturing the terrorists.⁴⁵

A recent example of the success of the JSOC occurred in the October 1985, capture of murdering Arab terrorists, who were responsible for hijacking the "Achille Lauro."

Despite the terrorists' escape aboard an Egyptian airliner; despite the protection offered the terrorist⁵ by the Egyptian Government; and despite the fact that the incident occurred thousands of miles from the U.S., the JSOC successfully forced the aircraft to the ground and captured the murderers of American Leon Klinghoffer.⁴⁶

Reviewing the recent history it appears that the U.S. Government, through its military forces, has a highly effective model of a SWAT team available to deal with the "high risk situations" within its International jurisdiction.

CONCLUSIONS

"Necessity, The Mother Of Invention!"

The intent of this paper was to briefly document the history of SWAT teams as they were developed for the law enforcement profession. Borrowing from military examples the civilian agencies employed weaponry and tactics that prior to 1965 had not been used outside of combat warfare.

From the Los Angeles Police Department's creation of a military style SWAT team in 1965, to the formation of the Joint Special Operations Command within the U.S. Armed Services in 1982, the SWAT concept has come full circle. The need to employ military tactics in police service provided tested techniques, which were proven effective in policing the International jurisdiction through the military services.

Through occurrences of such incidents cited earlier in this report the necessity for inventive approaches to "high risk situations" became clear. Necessity truly became the Mother of Invention.

Those charged with law enforcement must continue to observe and study the successes, failures and proven necessities learned from their combined experiences. Only in this manner can we continue to adapt to the ever changing needs of tomorrow's law enforcement.

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