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**Integrating Police Snipers into SWAT teams**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) teams across the world are the tactical police forces that are known to possess all the tools, tactics, and knowledge called upon to deal with circumstances beyond the capabilities of ordinary law enforcement that are considered high risk. With this kind of task and responsibilities, every SWAT team should also be prepared with police snipers. Police snipers use a combination of observation and intelligence gathering skills paired with long distance precision weaponry that serve beneficial to almost every tactical mission. Police agencies without snipers in their ranks place them at a tactical disadvantage. SWAT teams may not have snipers from a lack of knowledge or purposes of the police sniper. It could also be a more common police issue regarding liability hesitations or lack of funds. By law enforcement agencies integrating a sniper program into their SWAT teams, the teams would have more tactical resolutions and operation intelligence at their disposal.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the last decade, most know that law enforcement has been faced with more mass casualty shootings than in previous decades combined. One that changed the course of police action forever occurred in Austin, Texas at University of Texas in August, 1966 (Plaster, 2006). A student and ex-marine by the name of Charles Whitman positioned himself at the top of the twenty-eight story campus tower with a scoped Remington 700 hunting rifle and proceeded to make history. Plaster (2006) states that “Over the next 90 minutes, Whitman engaged the people up three blocks away, killing 13 and wounding another 31, for a staggering total of 44 casualties” (p 11). This was a mass casualty incident that police historically had never faced before. The area was flooded with law enforcement, but the pistols and shotguns the officers were equipped with were not effective at that distance. Although this incident eventually ended in Whitman’s death, the future of police work was changed forever.

Hard lessons were learned. Realizing their vulnerability of firepower and tactics, it is believed that this incident ultimately sparked the beginning of police special response teams or SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) teams across the nation. For the first time, it was obvious that police should have training in counter sniping (Plaster, 2006). Since that day in Austin, Texas, 1966, criminal snipers have been carrying out similar attacks, and in most cases, police responses have not changed (Bartlett, 2008). Today, agency SWAT teams should be equipped with superior firepower, including the precision weaponry police snipers needed to combat situations like the University of Texas shooting which still occur today. Bahde (2008) said “We learned long ago that failing to evolve, in our business, results on in lost profits, but lost lives” (p.73).

Over the years, a majority of police agencies around the world have adopted the use of SWAT teams to deal with circumstances beyond the capabilities of ordinary law enforcement that are considered high risk. SWAT teams incorporate the use of snipers to broaden their capabilities with specialized training, modern long-range optics, and precision weaponry. In the past, snipers have been labeled designated marksman, precision shooters, or sharpshooters. The label “sniper” has been considered offensive in the past due to the misuses that the media has been responsible for. There is an old Oriental expression, “The beginning of wisdom is to call a thing by its right name” (Bartlett, 1999, p19). A sniper is a sniper.

Oftentimes, the objectives of military and law enforcement snipers are labeled the same due to misleading television shows and movies. Police snipers are a specially selected, equipped, and trained member of the tactical team who, through the use of his equipment, training, and positioning is able to perform two main tactical functions. “The first is to observe and report. The second job is to bring precision fire against designated targets with the intention of immediately stopping the dangerous actions of his target” (Bartlett, 1999, p7). The combination of observation and intelligence gathering skills paired with long distance precision weaponry skills are the main two beneficial assets to implement to an already operating SWAT team.

The American Sniper Association (ASA), formed in 2000, was among the first to compile the most accurate data known to date in a Police Sniper Utilization Report. This reports actual police sniper shootings that occurred between 1985-2015 in the United States alone (American Sniper Association, 2015). Over this 30-year span, there were 412 documented police sniper engagements resulting in 316 deaths at distances that

ranged from 1 yard up to 595 yards. 140 involved barricaded subjects, 117 involved hostage situations, 81 were suicidal subjects, 14 were sniper suspects, and 37 were reported as other types. Geographically, these incidents occurred nationwide not limited to any specific area of the country in a full spectrum of jurisdictional sizes, densities, and demographics (American Sniper Association, 2015). These are credible statistics any department of any size or location should take seriously.

With that said, not all police SWAT teams have specially-designated snipers in their ranks that place them at a disadvantage. This could be from lack of knowledge and understanding of the purpose of the police sniper. It could also be more common police issue regarding liability hesitations or lack of funds. In today's day and age, police departments are attempting to take a proactive stance against terror and violence verses the unintended reactive approaches taken in the past. Law enforcement agencies should integrate a sniper program into their SWAT teams.

## **POSITION**

Everyday somewhere in America, police SWAT teams are being deployed into the most dangerous situations imaginable. High-risk search and arrest warrants, barricaded subjects, hostage situations, and active shooters are some of the most common callouts where a SWAT sniper could be utilized. First and foremost, a sniper's primary objective and one benefit to the team is their skills in observing and reporting real time intelligence back to command and the team (Bartlett, 1999). Implementing police snipers into the SWAT team will add the benefits of observation and intelligence gathering. Simple intelligence of suspect movement, descriptions, and geographical information could deem significant in operations planning. These situations are fluid and

constantly evolving with the suspect usually dictating the change. It is the sniper's job to monitor these situations from a safe far. They will also serve as a protective overwatch and lethal cover for the entry team as they make their approach to an objective (Bartlett, 1999).

Sometimes these situations last only a few minutes, but some have been known to last for hours, even days. With this said, not all police sniper operations occur in safe locations and suspects tend to be mobile. Therefore, it is customary to deploy snipers in teams of two. One stays behind the gun ready to deliver an accurate shot if needed, but this creates a limited field of view through the riflescope. The second serves as an observer that usually has a better field of view using his peripheral vision with other optics and holds a rear security for the two.

Gross (2008) stated "Trained snipers can gather information such as the location of door hinges, window hasp, locks, locations of animals, and possible approach routes for entry teams" (p.5). Commonly, these two are both trained for the same task and will switch positions around every 15-20 minutes to prevent fatigue and blurred vision that can set in during longer operations (Bartlett, 1999). These two must train as a team and be ready to deploy at a moment's notice and be capable of engaging threats under a timed pressure (Van Winkle, 2010). It is also known to most that two sets of eyes are always better than one. Gross (2008) states "Operating this way increases team safety; its effectiveness and efficiency ultimately increases the probability of a successful tactical outcome" (p.4).

A common piece of equipment used by police snipers for night time observation is night vision optics. The ASA reports that out of the documented 412 sniper

engagements, 169 of them occurred between 6pm and 6am in the dark hours (American Sniper Association, 2015). With a properly placed sniper team(s), SWAT command and officers will always have a real time knowledge of the target location and what is occurring from the outside view.

Secondly, and an equally as important capability of the adding a sniper program to SWAT teams, is the capability of delivering precision fire with the intention of immediately stopping the dangerous actions of the suspect(s). It is very likely a sniper would be responding to a deteriorating situation which calls for a deadly force response, such as an active shooter, hostage, civilian, or even a team member in imminent danger. In some cases, these must be halted immediately (Bartlett, 1999).

In the case of a hostage situation where negotiations have failed, a suspect may only expose himself for seconds at a time. In circumstances like this, snipers may be tasked to end the situation. In most cases, instant incapacitation is the only way to stop the suspect from harming anyone else after a shot is taken. A single precise high velocity shot aimed at the cranial vault of the suspect's head disabling his central nervous system has proven to cause a flaccid paralysis of the body to the suspect to execute the safest rescue of the hostage(s) or persons in danger (Clagett, Deneys, & Felts, 2008).

Unfortunately for the suspect, if the shot was accurate, this most always ends with the suspect deceased. Often, it is pondered why snipers need high powered weapons used by police snipers to accomplish this task. Specifically, it is due to the ballistic and accuracy capabilities it provides. Most law enforcement handgun rounds do not possess the ballistic attributes consistently to cause the instant incapacitation or

paralysis at close or extended ranges. Likewise, shotguns do not possess the accuracy needed to perform the same function. However, high velocity sniper rifles equipped with high powered scopes do (Clagett, Deneys, & Felts, 2008).

These kinds of precision shots are a result of routine training and a specialized weapons system. The most common weapon system in sniper community currently are chambered in .308 Winchester or the 7.62 mm in bolt action or semi-automatic configurations with specific match grade ammunition and high-powered rifle scopes. When paired correctly, these weapon systems can repeatedly and precisely shoot groups smaller than one inch at 100 yards which serves as an industry standard (Bartlett, 1999).

Additionally, it is also a common practice for police snipers to be trained to use precision fire to disable mobile vehicles from movement. This can be used to contain a suspect vehicle in a specific area to prevent further movement. Depending on the tactical situation, some departments have also adopted for heavier caliber weapon systems capable of the same accuracy. For heavier barrier penetration through steel, concrete, and vehicle motors, the .338 Lapua Magnum and the 50. caliber have also proved effective (Bartlett, 1999). These mentioned skills and precision weaponry are additional reasons snipers should be implemented into SWAT teams.

## **COUNTER ARGUMENTS**

Rivals of implementing snipers into SWAT teams often believe that liabilities of this position outweigh the benefits. With today's society of civil court judgements, departments have an obligation to take potential liabilities into account before making large decisions, especially ones that involve use of force. Simply equipping snipers with

the best equipment and weapons and deploying them unskilled or poorly trained could not only lead to tragedy, it could expose the department of negligence resulting in costly litigation (Lonsdale, 2017). Some of the potential liability exposures for agencies utilizing snipers are using unqualified or poorly trained rifleman, sub-standard selection & qualification requirements, no written standards, sub-standard basic training, inferior weapon systems and ammunition, lack of training time, lack of frequent documented training, lack of or absent written policies, procedures, and rules of engagement. There are also undocumented qualification shoots, unrealistic training and targets, no barrier or low light training, and lack of critical decision-making (Lonsdale, 2017). These are all viable liabilities to consider. Lonsdale (2017) stated “the concept that training must replicate reality, within the bounds of safety and reason, is not new in law enforcement” (p.5). Satisfactory levels of performance should also be documented so the reputations of the sniper team, the agency, the city, or the county will not be damaged (Lonsdale, 2017, p.5). SWAT operations are a dangerous job. Lonsdale (2017) also stated “especially when dealing with armed suspects who don’t adhere to the same standards of law-abiding citizens, the issue of liability can never be completely negated.” (p.5). It can however be significantly reduced. This can be achieved by deploying only trained and qualified snipers, who adhere to selection and qualifications standards; establish written policies, procedures, and rules of engagements; seek professional training; invest in quality sniper rifles, optics, and support equipment; require regular and realistic reality-based training with shoot/no shoot drills; and document all training and qualification shoots (Lonsdale, 2017). By being educated and aware of these potential liabilities paired with a commitment to prevent these common mistakes, police agencies

will have the documentation, instruction, and training needed to avoid most liability issues. Police agencies should incorporate snipers into their SWAT teams, but the same level of consideration should be taken to consider the liabilities that could arise if agencies do not commit to professional training and instruction.

Secondly, another weighing factor against not implementing a sniper program into SWAT teams is the cost. It is commonly known across law enforcement that department budgets litigate even the greatest ideas or solutions. Integrating a professional sniper program into a SWAT team requires a significant financial commitment by the police department. This is not limited to just the initial equipment purchases, but also for professional basic training, regular training, operational overtime, and training ammunition (Lonsdale, 2017).

A good sniper weapon system could cost thousands. Reputable sniper schools could cost hundreds (Bartlett, 1999). The initial budget for equipment to get started would include rifles, scopes, range finders, and ammunition for training and duty. The initial budget for training would include funds for a reputable police basic sniper school, match grade ammunition, lodging, and per diem. The recurring cost would entail on-duty training time, just like the training time involved with maintaining a SWAT team. The size of the department or SWAT team would usually dictate how often your team train regularly. Typically, larger departments train weekly where as a part time team at a smaller agency may train once a month (Lonsdale, 2017).

With this information in hand, it is agreed that implementing police snipers into a SWAT team can be a costly start-up. However, this process can also be achieved without the all up front initial cost. Being a sniper requires a commitment to excel at your

profession which could mean a financial commitment from the sniper as well (Bartlett, 1999). Larger police agencies may have the financial budget to fund a new program like this all at once. On the other hand, smaller agencies may offer the voluntary option to the snipers to purchase their own rifle system individually to offset the startup of the new program leaving the department to pay for the other cost of ammunition, training, or other needed items. It is obvious after reviewing the liability section of this paper that individual purchased rifle systems would have to meet the minimum standards of a pre-placed sniper policy that the agency would put in place prior to beginning this program. Without compromises like this, it is possible that smaller agencies would never have the adequate funds to commit to such a program. According to Bartlett (1999), "if your agency can't or won't buy the equipment needed, buy it yourself. The same goes for training" (p. 25). Lang (2014) states, "If you have to pay out of pocket because the agency has no money, do it. You have no else to blame for the level of your sniper training and performance if you do not seek to improve yourself" (p.2). While it is obvious that financially implementing a sniper program into SWAT teams can be a costly benefit, there is available alternatives to offset such cost.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Every law enforcement agency with SWAT teams should improve their teams by implementing police snipers into their ranks. With police SWAT teams completing high-risk search and arrest warrants and being called for dangerous barricaded subjects, hostage situations, and active shooters, snipers could be greatly utilized. By using their skills in observation and intelligence gathering, snipers can monitor suspect movements, gather suspect descriptions, gather geographical information such as the

location of door hinges, locks, locations of animals, and possible approach routes for entry teams (Gross, 2008). They can also serve as a protective overwatch and lethal cover for the entry team if they are forced to make entry (Bartlett, 1999).

By complimenting the team with the sniper's capabilities of long-range precision firepower, this will add numerous tactical options to SWAT command. A sniper responding to a deteriorating situation which calls for a deadly force response, such a hostage, civilian, active shooter, or even a team mate in imminent danger, the sniper is capable of halting the actions immediately if deemed necessary. In the case of a hostage situation where negotiations have failed, snipers can be used to deliver precision fire to end the situation and stop the suspect from harming anyone else after a shot is taken (Bartlett, 1999). This type of tactical option may not be available without the implementation of a sniper on the team.

Although there are reasonable liability issues that can arise from implementing police snipers to SWAT teams, there are solutions to prevent them. Potential liability exposures for agencies utilizing snipers include: using unqualified or poorly trained rifleman, substandard or no standard selection and qualification requirements, substandard basic training, use of inferior weapon systems and ammunition, lack of training time, lack of frequent documented training, lack of or absent written policies, and standard operating procedures. Undocumented qualification shoots, unrealistic training and targets, no barrier or low light training, and lack of critical decision-making also serve as liability issues (Lonsdale, 2017).

By simply being educated on the issues paired with a commitment to create and follow better standard practices, police agencies can alleviate a majority of these

liabilities. By deploying only trained and qualified snipers; adhering to selection and qualifications standards; establishing written policies, procedures, and rules of engagements; seeking professional training, investing in quality sniper rifles, optics, and support equipment, requiring regular and realistic reality-based training with shoot/no shoot drills; and documenting all training and qualification shoots are solutions to these liabilities (Lonsdale, 2017). However, Lonsdale (2017) states “When dealing with armed suspects who do not play by the rules or adhere to standards of law-abiding citizens, the issue of liability can never be negated” (p.7).

Cost is also an obvious concern to any police department looking to implement a sniper program, but there are alternatives already addressed. This would require significant financial commitment by the police agency not limited to just the initial equipment purchases, but also for professional basic training, regular training, operational overtime, and training ammunition (Lonsdale, 2017). However, this process can also be achieved without the all up front initial cost. Being a sniper requires a commitment to excel at your profession which could mean a financial commitment from the sniper as well (Bartlett, 1999).

Larger or smaller agencies may offer the voluntary option to the snipers to purchase their own rifle system individually to offset the startup cost of the new program leaving the department to pay for the other costs of ammunition, training, or other needed items. Research sources from Bartlett (1999) and Lang (2014) suggest committed snipers may have to fund their own training and equipment, if their police agencies don't fund it. Implementing a sniper program into SWAT teams will broaden their capabilities with extra tools, tactics, and solutions to better prepare them for their

next callout. Sain (2008) stated “We need to constantly remind ourselves of the lessons of the past, because sooner, some of us will undoubtedly confront them again in the future” (p.153). It is not a matter of if it will happen here, but a matter of when it will happen here.

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