

# Explosive Breaching: Getting Started

by Brian Washburn, Region I

The role of the Bomb Squad has changed to match the current threat potential. Bomb Squads are now finding their agencies requesting more tactical diversity and interoperability with their SWAT teams. Even some County or Regional Bomb Squads are finding they are being called out to assist local agencies, not their own. Because of these changes Bomb Squads are finding they are entering into the tactical world and stepping out of the traditional role of Improvised Explosive Device response, mitigation and recovery; with this comes many new challenges for the Bomb Squad. Tactical Explosive Breaching has become one of the main focuses of the marriage between Tactical Teams and Bomb Squads.

There are many agencies with programs and many agencies looking to start programs. I am going to discuss my experiences in trying to start a breaching program and the hurdles I have encountered. There is the question of who will administer a breaching program. Will it be SWAT or will it be the Bomb Squad? What are the liabilities, initial costs, training, etc? I started out by researching these questions and came up with as many questions as answers.

Further, I found the DHS FEMA typing for Bomb Squads and SWAT teams listing “explosive breaching” as a typing requirement for Type 1 Teams and recommended for Type 2 and 3. Additionally, SWAT teams have a FEMA typing requirement for Type 1 teams for explosive breachers as well as a robot technician and a recommendation for a Type 2 team for the breaching and robot technician. Additionally, breaching equipment is listed under the Approved Equipment Lists (AELs) for DHS grant purchasing. It seems explosive breaching is a recognized need by DHS and agencies are seeing the need to start programs. So the question remains, does the Bomb Squad take on the roll of explosive breaching or does it get turned over to SWAT? This question is not an easy one and really is agency specific.



Water impulse shot used on an outward opening metal skin over solid wood fire door with Plexiglass window. The shot defeated the door and did not break the window in the door. The window above the door was cracked and a window adjacent to the door was broken. No other collateral damage. –Training shot

Probably the best way for me to relay the what I encountered when presenting explosive breaching to my agency would be to provide an excerpt from a letter between a local agency requesting information for justifying their own breaching program using the fact there is no mutual aid resource in the county for this type of response operations. I will attach a copy of a portion of the letter between myself and the local agency about the work it has taken to start an Explosive Breaching Program.

**How does your program at the S.O. work?** *I have been working on bringing a breaching program to my agency for almost 5 years now. I have gone as far as bringing a respected Breaching Instructor, Chuck O’Connor (North Vector), to sit down with my agency administration and discuss requirements, policy needs, etc. Currently the SO still does not have an active program. However, with that said, we have provided our SERT (SWAT) team with a live demonstration of the capabilities and*

*limitations of breaching. This is the first year the Bomb Squad has been able to train with SERT and provide this type of demonstration. It appears the agency is embracing the concept and considering me to train a breaching unit.*

**Does your EOD have the breacher/equipment and you become part of SERT’s stack during an entry?** *Yes, we have our own equipment. Once we have established procedures within my agency I foresee the Breacher being in the stack. However, once the shot is fired the Breacher will take a “rear guard” position and not make entry unless called up to breach a fortified interior door.*

**Do you train anyone on SERT to be an assistant breacher?** *Currently, we do not have SERT persons trained. Again, I am the only*

person on this agency with any practical experience in explosive breaching. I have given in-service training to the other techs, but no one from SERT. My plan is to start with 4 breachers: 2 SERT and 2 Bomb. The bomb squad will maintain the explosives and equipment. While the SERT members will understand construction and placement needs. I would further like to bring on Associate Breachers for helping with the building of shots, etc. This will keep more people involved and reduce work load on Breachers. But, with that said, you must trust the person building the shot and all of their calculations and documentation. Build and fire your own shots to begin with.

**What assistance, if any, does your EOD provide as mutual aid to a SWAT team outside of SERT?** The Sheriff's Office Bomb Squad is a mutual aid resource in county and out of county for any agency requiring assistance. I have offered service to your agency in the past and also to cross train with your team. So you understand any equipment purchased through grant funding requires the equipment to be mutual aid asset to other surrounding agencies. Further, we do have a robot that can be used for hostage negotiations, surveillance, etc.

**What direction do you think the S.O. is headed regarding tactical explosive breaching? (Maintain status quo, train SERT operators to be tactical explosive breacher only, etc.)**

It is my opinion that the Sheriff's Office is moving toward the understanding that explosive breaching is another tool for the box. One thing that you should really consider when selling your project is that explosive breaching WILL NOT replace manual or mechanical breaching, but rather provide an alternative means to expeditiously enter a fortified structure while minimizing the threat to the operators and reducing the time required to gain entry. The reduction of time on target to gain entry provides for a higher percentage of mission success and/or hostage rescue.

I do not see my agency only having SERT trained as explosive breachers. Really, this would not make sense as we already have a Bomb Squad in place. I see both teams coming together to work more closely in these types of situations.

**Where does your unit go for training and how often do you conduct these types of shots?** There are several breaching schools out there. Initially, I put myself through the two week explosive breaching course and have kept-up with it on my own time. Also, California OSHA has a Tactical Explosive Breaching license so there are some standards you have to meet. Currently, the team does not train in explosive breaching. I really stress safety in breaching and the need for quality training before conducting any explosive breach. There are many factors to be considered; over pressure and fragmentation to name only two. Plus, complete and thorough documentation of our shots must be recorded. I would suggest you train at a minimum quarterly for the breachers and bi-annually for the breachers and SWAT team. More often would be better as it would allow for experimentation and familiarity with building shots and placement. Further, if you can, you want to find buildings which are about to be demolished as this will give you the most accurate information on load data for future shots. Load data is a crucial part of breaching and a failed shot will provide more information than a positive shot. More is not always better in breaching.

**I do not see (agency name) starting an explosives unit, per se, but only having the capability to provide explosive breaching capabilities. In your opinion, what are the biggest hurdles to overcome in order to getting and maintaining a program like I've just described? After the initial purchase of product, tuition, etc., what kind of routine maintenance, replacement, etc. seems to be the biggest issue?** Okay, about maintenance and ongoing training I will say this. Plan on conducting monthly or bi-monthly training for the breaching team and bi-annual training for the entire SWAT and breaching team. Explosives are your biggest consumable. Figure a couple thousand dollars a year in costs just for training explosives. Dual shock tube imitators run about \$800 and depending on use can wear out after a couple of years. Otherwise, things are fairly durable. You will also need bladders, etc. for building shots. These are the little things that do add up. Figure at min \$1 - 2K a year in other consumables. Occasionally you may need a breacher's blanket or additional body bunker. Figure \$5K each for those. Go with a bunker over a blanket. (my opinion) I have gone high on costs, but seriously the numbers are close.

I know I have probably left more questions than answers about starting a program. I just wanted to share some of my hurdles and what the questions are of non-bomb squad agencies looking to create an explosive breaching program.

I will say when starting a program look into the Operational Area needs. Determine if there is a breaching program in the area and contact that agency to see what they did to implement the program. Look at training time, beyond that of traditional bomb squad training, the interoperability between the Bomb Squad and SWAT team and costs. Probably one of the biggest of all being agency policy and how explosive breaching will fall into the force continuum. Outside MOUs if your team will respond to other agencies. The list can go on. If we look to the recent current events in Colorado and Virginia, we should all have this critical skill in our tool box.☛



Outward opening solid particle core door. Hinge charge used for a diagonal shot while on target. Shot functioned as designed and separated the top of door from the bottom.