A Day of Firsts

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Front of target residence. Notice the unkempt yard, fence , barricaded door and windows.

On the morning of May 8, 2008 at about 0830 hours, Sgt. Clay Williams of the Oklahoma City Police Department and his partner approached a small house on NE 9th street in reference to a domestic disturbance. As they made contact Sgt. Williams was shot once near his collarbone and was pulled to safety by his partner. The shooter then went inside his residence where he would keep responders at bay with gunfire for the next ten hours. The ensuing standoff would be a day of firsts for the Edmond Police Department (EPD) and the Oklahoma City Police Department (OCPD)Bomb Squads. It would be the first joint operation involving the OCPD and EPD Bomb Squads since the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, and the first ever joint tactical operation involving both units. It would also provide an opportunity for the first dual robot operation for either unit. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, this incident would be the first operational explosive breach for both squads (and possibly the State of Oklahoma) and it was the first attempt at utilizing a robot as a placement and initiation tool for explosive breaching. Not everything detailed in the incident below is perfect or the optimum way of doing things. But, it worked out and it certainly was a day of firsts.

DECISIONS

Following the shooting, Oklahoma City SWAT and patrol personnel surrounded the residence on NE 9th Street and began to set up a perimeter. As officers set up the perimeter the subject inside the house, John Ivory Thomas, continued to fire towards the responders forcing them to create an even larger perimeter. The decision was made early that whatever happened tactically during the standoff was going to happen remotely. The Oklahoma City Bomb Squad was then activated and responded to the scene with an F6A Andros robot. Another key decision made early in the operation was to strongly consider the use of explosive breaching as a means of gaining entry into the residence. Yet since the decision had already been made to try and keep operations as remotely as possible, reliable methods of charge placement became a very real concern.

THE HOUSE

The residence, located on the north east side of town, was a smaller, single story house surrounded by tall grass, unkempt trees and an old chain link fence. The terrain was made more difficult by the fact a strong storm had ripped through the Oklahoma City metro

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area the night before leaving the ground soggy and covered with numerous sticks and fallen branches. Approximately 800 square feet, the lower half of the façade was brick and the upper half was old aluminum siding. All of the windows had either interior or exterior iron bars bolted to the structure. The front door, where the initial incident took place, was located on a small elevated brick landing and also had a heavy, exterior metal door. There was a rear door on the north side of the residence which appeared to be a standard wood exterior door. Another door on the west side of the structure also had a metal exterior door made of "burglar bars", and an additional storm door. There were other access points on the east side of the residence, but they were blocked by a locked chain link fence and a large pickup truck. Any approaches made by the robot were going to have to be made from the west. The approximate time was 0900 hrs.

TRAINING HISTORY AND RESPONSE

When the OCPD Bomb Squad, commanded by Lt. Ron Keef, a veteran of the Murrah Federal Building bombing, arrived on scene they immediately set up operations. They made contact with the other units already on scene and were briefed on the details of the situation. A map of the immediate area was taped to the side of their response vehicle and plans began to form. SWAT gave the Bomb Squad a list of requests. First, they asked for possible entry points using explosive breaching should they would need a way in quickly and safely. Second, they told bomb squad members the suspect was not communicating, so a throw phone would have to be deployed. Due to the suspect's continued rate of fire, as well as lack of covered approaches, the throw phone would have to be deployed remotely. Finally, they would need a way to deploy gas into the residence. OCPD Bomb Squad quickly realized they would need additional assets for this operation and notified the EPD Bomb Squad. Resting on the OKC's northern most border, Edmond is a suburb of about 80,000 residents and 115 officers. The Edmond Bomb Squad Commander, Sgt. Scott Fees, also a veteran of the Murrah Federal Building bombing and a trained explosive breacher, answered the call and notified the other members of our squad. Sgt. Fees and the author attended "T.E.E.S." several years ago and had been training on explosive breaching ever since. Sgt. Jim Teel and Officer Bruce Leehan had just returned from "Olive" breaching school in West Memphis, TN just five days prior and were ready to utilize their new found skills. This was not the first time both squads had worked and trained together. In April, 1995 both squads worked together during response and recovery operations after the Murrah Federal Building bombing. Since then, bomb squads throughout state have met at least once a month to discuss trends, intelligence and training issues. The Edmond and OCPD Squads had been conducting additional explosive breaching training together. The ability to contact a neighboring agency and ask for assistance and without the complications of red tape or unknown personalities, ultimately is what kept this call safe. Because of this preexisting friendly relationship, response time was accelerated. This long established relationship would prove invaluable as the day progressed.

STAGING AREA

The fifth member of the Edmond Squad, Rockie Yardley, arrived with the department's F6A and we began to set up. Both squads shared a two lane road a few hundred yards form the target residence and parked our response vehicle across the street from one another. This decision would prove vital in the coming hours as messages were relayed and intelligence confirmed. Another key component of our staging area was that we were not right on top of the operation's command post or those running it. The target residence was just to the south of a major intersection of 10th Street and Bryant Avenue. The operation was run from a command post on 10th Street, west of the intersection and we had the north side of the intersection all to ourselves. Since Edmond and Oklahoma City PD operate on different radio bands, an OCPD Tech was stationed next to Rockie Yardely during all robot operations. This way information and instructions could be relayed between the two agencies. Every so often a police chaplain would come by with snacks or bottled water, but for the most

Both robots heading down range. Neither robot was in line of site of the command post for the duration of the operation.

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part we were on our own. It was great! Forward of the primary staging area OCPD SWAT had established an advanced staging closer to the target residence. This area provided cover and concealment for responders and was located approximately twenty yards from the target residence. OCPD techs R. Willis and Roger Wagoner were stationed in this area for much of the call in order to make adjustments to the charges or the robots.

THE CHARGE AND THE TARGET

Once the techs had set up their equipment, the discussion regarding the type of charge to build and the selection of a target began. SWAT, of course led this portion of the discussion, but since we were driving the robot, we put in our two cents too. The windows were ruled out almost immediately as entry points as they were too high and covered by burglar bars. The doors facing the front of the residence were also ruled out as there was very little cover and concealment on that side of the house. Anything on the east side was out because of debris on the ground. That left the rear door and a door on the west side of the structure. The rear door seemed to be the simplest as it did not have burglar bars attached to it. At this point our intelligence began to change rapidly. Most of the intelligence was gathered from the actual resident of the house, the suspect's mother. At first the squads were told the rear door was a metal with burglar bars, then told it was a wooden door, and finally learned it was a metal door, with no burglar bars. The squads then developed a charge that would defeat a metal exterior door and could be placed by an F6A. The breachers decided to employ an IV Charge with four 1000ml IV bags. Two bags would sandwich five feet of 50 grain det cord and would be connected by another three feet of 25 grain det cord to the other two bags. The charge was then attached to a broom stick with duct tape. The breachers all realized this was not optimum, but they worked with what they had. Neither squad had ever trained on remote placement of explosive charges. The prop sticks we normally use would not hold up on the long trip from the staging area to the house. The broom stick attachment method would have to do. It was decided that breachers tape would be used to stick the charge to the door. The F6A grabbed the broom stick, and with Rockie Yardley at the controls, went down range.

PLACEMENT AND INITIATION

The OCPD Andros was operated by OCPD Techs Randy Castle, Jason Hodges and Mark Easly, a veteran of the Murrah Federal Building bombing. These three techs would periodically switch out the driver position or stand by as an observer. Along with Mike Jackson

and Randy Kirby they would also help facilitate communication issues and other logistical support. The OCPD robot had been down range for a short time and had picked the most favorable route. Again due to the storm the previous night OCPD had to clear a path that both robots could use throughout the operation. Once the okay was given Rockie Yardley, another veteran of the Murrah Federal Building bombing, drove the robot 150 yards south down Bryant Avenue, across 10th Street and look a left turn just north of 9th Street. The F6A maneuvered over the curb and into the tall damp grass, spinning out orange fiber optic cable as it advanced.

The target location was about 100 yards due east of the curb and was pretty much a straight shot. As the robot neared the target location both squads could hear gun fire over the F6A's microphone. Edmond's F6A made it through the neighboring backyards and was now entering the target location's fenced in area. Rockie made a sharp left turn and headed to the backyard. He found the back door with easily and began the approach, then he noticed a problem. The door was not metal, it was made of wood and did not appear to be very sturdy. The squads took a moment to discuss this new development before deciding to stick with the original plan. The charge was meant for a metal exterior door, but the suspect was still not responding to negotiators on a megaphone and actively shooting at the officers; it was decided a breach was needed and needed quickly. This charge could easily defeat the wood door and give plenty of room for a throw phone or an assault team if needed. Rockie placed the charge, which stuck for a moment, but then fell off the door. The F6A was able to hold onto the charge before it fell to the ground. Another attempt was made to attach the charge, but the tape was not adhering to the surface of the door. There was no time to bring the charge back and fix it or come up with another charge. There was no telling how long that would take. The commanders on scene refused to allow any breacher to approach the target residence to place the charge. Always, safety first. Rockie then turned the charge to the left and wedged it in the doorway. The squads saw no other option. The F6A backed up about twelve feet and a count down was given over the radio. The F6A initiated the charge and the bottom half of the door disappeared. There was very little fragmentation and the squads, negotiators and SWAT were given their first glimpse of the inside of the residence. The port made by the charge was big enough for a throw phone, but not big enough for an entry team. Another way would have to be found. It was 1345 hours.

FAILED NEGOTIATIONS

Now that a port had been made, the negotiator's throw phone could be inserted into the house. Edmond's F6A returned to a forward staging area and was given the throw phone. The Edmond robot took the phone forward and placed the phone just inside the port created by the explosive charge. As the F6A backed out the phone's cable became snagged and was pulled out of the house and had to be placed again. The robot operators did not know that the phone had to be placed in a very specific way so negotiators could make best use of the cameras and audio devices. After the phone was placed and Edmond's F6A returned to the staging area, it was

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discovered the throw phone's cameras were pointing to the ground or out the port through which the phone was placed. Hours later, during a post incident debrief, it was learned the audio line from the throw phone was damaged and the negotiators were not able to hear what was happening inside the house. Negotiations would have to be conducted verbally via a mega phone. With the suspect still firing at responders and refusing to answer the calls of the negotiators, the situation was looking grim. SWAT decided to move to the next step and deploy gas into the house.

SECOND BREACH

Four canisters of gas and twice as many 40mm gas shells failed to force the suspect from the residence. The call came down to attempt another breaching shot, this time on the west door. This door had an aluminum storm door, an iron door comprised of burglar bars and a standard exterior wood door. The shot selection was a simple choice of a rigid folding linear charge with 200 grains of 50 grain det cord. The plan was to open the storm door via a robot and use the robot again to place the charge on the hinged side of the burglar bar door. Easier said than done. The exterior storm door was tied to the burglar bar door with bailing wire. Furthermore, as with the previous charge, we had never attempted to place this type of charge with a robot. To give the robot a better purchase on the charge, a fence picket was borrowed from an old fence close to the squad's staging area. The picket was a few inches longer and wider than our charge and fit nicely into the robot's gripper. Once again the Edmond F6A was sent down range. The storm door was pulled free of the other doors and was left standing open. The exterior of the other two doors was being studied when yelling was heard coming form the robot's left side. The robot operator panned the camera to the left and the suspect could clearly be seen exiting the residence and being taken into custody by OCPD SWAT officers. The suspect gave no warning of his surrender and could be heard firing shots just minutes before. The time was 1830 hours.

LESSONS LEARNED

Remote Operations. The old adage of "go remote, stay remote" was strictly followed in this case. This decision made things safer and as a result neither officers nor suspect was harmed. Staying remote, however, did increase the time required to conduct the operation. Both squads experienced situations which they had not encountered before.

Robot Training. Though both squads were well versed in explosive breaching tactics and procedures, neither squad had incorporated the robot, F6A, into the breaching training. Though initiation was not a problem for the F6A, placement of the charge and the lack of depth perception were two issues to overcome, with placement being the more important of the two.

Joint Training and Interoperability. Training with neighboring jurisdictions and establishing a positive working relationship is an important aspect of a successful joint response. Had the OCPD Bomb Squad not been familiar with Edmond's tactics, personnel or procedures they most likely would not have called for assistance. Joint training and interoperability between SWAT and the bomb squads was also proved important. If your agency is involved with explosive breaching then you need to be training with your local SWAT element.

Charge Placement. In this instance the charge could not be placed as planned and therefore was not employed effectively. Had the squads been able to place the charge properly and affix it to the door, the entire door most likely would have been defeated.

INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence gathering proved especially important and none of the responders realized this fully until after the

Result of Explosive Breach.

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standoff ended. While examining the door which was breach by the IV Charge, it was noticed that the door had been barricaded with "Jamaican" door stops from the inside. After close inspection of the aluminum siding, several bolts were observed on either side of the door approximately 18" from the top of the door. Close inspection also showed that a wooden 2 x 4 had been placed across the bottom half of the door and had been defeated by the IV charge. This issue drove home to all involved the vital importance of intelligence gathering. In the end, the IV charge proved to be the proper choice for the target door.

Incident Command. Placing both of the squads' response vehicles in close proximity proved to be a good decision too. Being able to talk to and gather information from a counterpart face to face, instead of being separated, facilitated the response. Though the primary command post for the entire operation was separate from the bomb squad staging area, no communication problems were encountered and positive communication was maintained between both command areas via radio. The OCPD Special Operations Captain Clint Caswell, who commands OCPD SWAT and Bomb Squad, continually made sure both agencies were in contact with each other and with the primary Command Post.

At the end of the day both squads took stock of the day's events. They had been on scene for about eleven hours. They had conducted dual robot operations in a tactical setting. With the robots they had deployed chemical agents and deployed a throw phone. But most impressive to the squads was that they had remotely placed and successfully initiated an explosive breaching charge. In conclusion this incident proves that local agency awareness, interoperability and skill competency are vital factors in over coming real world challenges safely and successfully.

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