

BOMB DISPOSAL SUPPORT IN TACTICAL OPERATIONS

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This could be the ultimate nightmare in a hostage scenario. An improvised explosive device (IED) placed on a hostage, or, suspects using explosives and booby traps to maintain control of hostages. Consider also, a suspect threatening to deploy a weapon of mass destruction. Hostage rescues in structural or linear environments are dangerous in and of themselves. Add explosives to the mix and the risk increases exponentially. Explosives and booby traps in the hands of a foe determined to use them become a force multiplier. The suspect instantly has the ability to do more damage with fewer collaborators. The use of explosives provides both a delay and/or an offensive tool against a tactical entry team. It allows the suspect control of a hostage or multiple hostages without even being in the room with them.

Is this something new? We need only to look at the school takeover at Columbine to see IEDs used in a domestic incident. The events at Columbine forced law enforcement agencies across the country to hone the skills necessary to respond to incidents with active shooters. However, has similar training been held to prepare for bomb disposal support in similar situations?

If events overseas are a precursor of things to come, we see a trend towards criminals combining a large number of hostages with the use of explosives, creating prolonged and sometimes disastrous incidents.

Within the law enforcement special operations community we must ask ourselves if we are ready to respond to incidents such as these. Do we have the necessary resources in place to deal with any contingency that may arise in these situations? In order to respond appropriately all elements of this community, tactical and bomb disposal, must form a cohesive team.

Our unit realized that should an incident like this happen in our state, we would be called upon to respond. To date, we have already responded to three school incidents involving IED's or shootings.

Two years ago we studied the hostage takeovers in Beslan, the Moscow theatre, Columbine and the Platte County Colorado High School. We discovered a variety of common

factors in each of these incidents: multiple hostages, multiple armed suspects (with the exception of Platte County High School), IED/booby traps or the threat of, and a stronghold assault resulting in the loss of life. We did not try to "Monday morning quarterback" the actions taken. Rather, we asked ourselves if, given our experience, we had the specific skills needed to respond. And, did SWAT teams in our state know that we could support them in these incidents?

The GBI Special Operations Unit is the state bomb disposal/EOD team. We respond to an average of 300 call-outs per year to include dignitary protection and special event standbys. The team is made up of twenty five bomb techs located throughout the state. After selection, our team members go through a pipeline of schools in addition to the FBI Hazardous Devices School. These schools include medical first responder, hazmat, terrorist threat assessment, advanced explosive destruction techniques and rifle school.

The concept of EOD support for tactical operations is not a new one. The military, particularly special operations forces (SOF) units tasked with counter-terrorism duties, have been doing this for years. Navy EOD has been embedded with SEAL Teams in squadron work-ups and deployments. SOF realizes that the effect of an explosive threat varies; it may just prolong the amount of time needed to achieve an objective, or at worst it can cause fatalities. This is true for any tactical team whether in Afghanistan or Atlanta, Baghdad or Boston. The difference is in the level of sophistication of

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the bomb maker and frequency of incidents. Yet, we know information about IEDs is readily available. A recent Google search of “IED construction” revealed 1.42 million hits. The only question remaining concerns the intent of the suspect and whether or not he has possession of the components.

EOD assault support is simple in reality. As implied, the bomb disposal team works in SUPPORT of the tactical commander. The incidents requiring this support can include hostage situations, active shooters or warrant service. One of the primary roles of the bomb tech in these operations is to facilitate the movement of the tactical team. A basic core skill of the bomb tech is the recognition and defeat of booby traps. For example, prior to the service of a high risk warrant, the tactical team commander may have intelligence that the suspect has the ability to make booby traps. Bomb team members can offer guidance during the initial planning stages as to possible chokepoints and booby trap deployment areas based on overhead photos or surveillance team observations. The tactical team commander can then incorporate this information into his operational planning. Once the plan has been formed and the decision made to execute it, the bomb tech can be integrated into the entry team in order to defeat these hazards. In hostage situations, or a device near a hostage, the bomb tech has the training to render it safe.

The risk of this device detonating is complicated by the fact that it might be set off by either the suspect or the hostage.

Time is a crucial element in any tactical entry. Therefore, certain bomb squad stereotypes must be disregarded concerning assault support. This is not a robot following an entry element down a hallway. Nor is it a bomb tech in a bomb suit waiting to be called into a structure. This is a new dynamic. Assault support is two or three bomb techs, wearing the same gear as the entry team. Their render safe procedure (RSP) tools are carried on them and in backpacks. They are fluid in movement and communication, moving at the back of the entry stack, flowing with the team. When a

possible booby trap or device is encountered by the entry team, they are called up by the point man and “hall boss.” They will then determine if the obstacle can be bypassed or defeated, how much time it will take and how much noise will be involved with the RSP. If it cannot be defeated, another route must be found.

This information is relayed to the “hall boss” who in turn will decide which action to take. Upon completion of this action, the bomb team resumes its place at the back of the stack, moving with the team, awaiting additional call ups. Again, their primary purpose is to overcome any obstacles that hinder the movement of the entry element, thus maintaining the momentum of the assault force. Once the structure and its occupants are secured and the structure evacuated, the bomb techs can return to their conventional EOD role and render safe any devices left within.

Even within a specialty like bomb disposal, the skills required to perform this type of operation are very specialized. For this reason there are very few people qualified to teach it. The GBI found such instructors at A-T Solutions. These instructors were former military EOD operators with experience supporting U.S. and British-counter-terrorist teams. Each had an extensive background and multiple overseas tours. The training course was two weeks long and had the following objectives:

1. Enhance the individual bomb technician skills, in threat assessment and render safe procedures required for a tactical operation
2. Enhance the bomb technicians skills in tactical awareness
3. Enhance the SWAT operators awareness of bomb technician procedures
4. Enhanced the SWAT operator awareness of IEDs

It was clear that only by achieving these objectives and training together, could SWAT and their supporting Bomb Technicians become a cohesive team with an improved capability.

The first week of the course was spent improving our skills to enable us to confidently deal with a range of booby trap and hostage type devices quickly and effectively. This training included topics such as circuit and detonator diagnostics, cutting and entry, tactical search, hostage handling. All tasks were conducted both in daylight and at night, relying upon night vision aids.

The second week of the course addressed the tactical aspects of the operation and the necessity of joint training. During the week we conducted our own drills with a simulated SWAT team in order to be able to rapidly deploy and defeat IEDs while remaining tactically sound and maintaining situational awareness. SWAT team leaders from around the state were

invited to a brief on the training that we were conducting and what we could now provide for them. Each stated that they desired the support and were glad the need was being addressed. The final day culminated with four exercises that incorporated a SWAT team and supporting Bomb Squad assets.

The final exercise was a great success, however it highlighted the necessity for joint training. Each individual team observed that as the day progressed, and more tasks were completed, they were working far more efficiently and effectively together. We ended the training with an increased comfort level with each teams' ability and increased knowledge on how we could put this into play in a real world situation. Each gained a level of respect for the others' abilities and skills. Future combined training was planned and gear compatibility was addressed. We have already earmarked the funds necessary to repeat the school twice, enabling our entire team to benefit from this training.

In the context of this discussion, we can not think in terms of SWAT as one entity and bomb disposal as a separate entity. As a former SWAT entry team member and a current bomb tech, I know there are challenges to overcome with each entity. There can be apprehension regarding integration by individual team members. Each views his specialty as elite and rightfully so. Rather than focusing on how the two specialties are different, it is worthwhile to look at the similarities. Many common personality traits are shared by the SWAT operator and bomb technician. By virtue of his chosen specialty, this individual is the type who wants to be involved with the resolution of high risk incidents. Each tends to be a self starter, desires to improve his skills, and views himself as a problem solver. He enjoys the physical nature and mental challenge of his work. Although he may push himself in the development of specialty skills, the desire to function as a member of a team is paramount. As such, each tends to hold little regard for those who cannot function in a team environment.

Any apprehension about joint operations can be easily overcome through joint training. SWAT must realize that their bomb squad, if trained, will be able to expedite their movement to a target by recognizing and defeating booby traps, hazards and IED's. Bomb disposal techs must realize that they will leave their "comfort zone" to become part of an entry team. A joint operation put together on the day of an incident is doomed to failure. We must learn each others technical language and produce a language that is clearly understood by both disciplines. It is incumbent upon both EOD and SWAT to ensure, through joint training, that they become integrated into a cohesive and effective tactical unit. It is antiquated thinking to not recognize the strengths of both disciplines. It is progressive thinking to realize that by combining these teams and their strengths a new level of capability can be obtained.

The desired end goal is the same. Integration is the way to achieve it.

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