

Tactical Explosive Breaching:
An Introduction on the use of Explosives in Today's Police Department

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March 14, 2003

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As police departments enter the 21st century we must be cognizant of the society that we live in and focus our attention in adapting to the latest changes that enhance our ability to better serve the community. I will discuss the practical applications of tactical explosive breaching based on my personal experience, articles, and interviews, in an effort to persuade your administration to adopt a tactical explosive breaching plan. As a current police administrator with Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) training I understand the important impact that the use of explosives plays in police work. My goal is to provide your department with a comprehensive account of explosive breaching as it considers implementing an explosive tactical breaching plan.

In presenting a credible argument for the use of explosives I believe that it is necessary for me to give the reader an account of my background and knowledge with explosives. I became a Little Rock Police Officer in January 1995. After graduating from the Police Academy I was assigned to the Patrol Division for almost three years. The experience I gained while working as a patrol officer was positive; however, I wanted to increase my knowledge in police work. After completing the SWAT tryouts, I was placed on the eligibility list and was subsequently transferred to the SWAT team in September 1997. Soon after transferring to the SWAT team we began training on using explosives as a breaching technique. The commander of the SWAT unit wanted to make sure that every team member had a complete and thorough knowledge of explosives. Every team member attended a class on explosive breaching and was tested on their knowledge and ability to handle explosives in

a classroom and during training scenarios. At the completion of the class, the SWAT supervisors decided to create a four man breaching team that would be responsible for explosive entries. I was selected to be a member of the explosive breaching team. Although the entire SWAT team contacted to receive explosive training, the four man breaching team would be tasked with actual explosive entries.

After the formation of the Tactical Explosive Breaching team, I began researching policies and procedures from police departments around the country. In doing this I worked closely with the SWAT supervisors and I played an instrumental role in developing the policies that our department is currently using. I will explain the importance of having a comprehensive policy on the use of explosives later in this report.

In implementing an explosive breaching plan there are many things that should be considered. Throughout the next several paragraphs I will cover the initial reasoning why departments of all sizes should implement a Tactical Explosive Breaching plan. I will discuss three areas of importance and provide detailed accounts and facts that will have a tremendous impact in swaying reluctant administrators on the use of explosives. The first area that will examine is officer safety.

OFFICER SAFETY

If police administrators are to be effective in managing the resources of their department it is paramount that we show the highest regard for officer safety. In a recent article in The Tactical Edge, Fall 2000, entitled “Establishing a Tactical Explosive Breaching Program”, the authors Charles O’ Conner and Ben Tisa stated that “Tactical breaching

methods are skills all agencies should possess regardless of the size of the agency or frequency of the incidents.” I found this quote significant because even small departments should not be limited to the need to have all options available during a time of crisis. The Little Rock Police Department places a major emphasis on officer safety by stating the following in its policy and procedure on explosive breaching: “Explosive breaching should not be considered for use on non-fortified entry points unless such use is necessary for the safety of the officers and/or hostage(s).”

In February 1998, the Little Rock Police Department SWAT team was summoned to assist the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in a search and seizure warrant on Schiller Street. Prior to conducting the search warrant, we were briefed by the FBI that the suspect in the residence was a gang member that was armed with an assault rifle and wanted on federal drug charges. We were given our assignments by the SWAT supervisors before executing the warrant. My assignment was to use the battering ram to breach the door. To successfully execute the warrant it was incumbent on me to breach the door as soon as possible. As team members were shouting, “police search warrant!” I struck the door with the thirty-pound ram. After the first strike to the door the suspect inside the residence began shooting towards the door with an assault rifle. As a new SWAT team member I immediately struck the door a second time, which put a large hole in the door. The door would not come open until I struck it a third time. Fortunately no one was injured that day, including the suspect. If our department had the ability to use explosives the officers could have breached the door on the first attempt giving the suspect less time to react, which would decrease the likelihood of officers being shot at. In executing a search warrant it may be

necessary to describe the type of door and the possibility of barricades before the courts will authorize SWAT to use explosives to breach a door or other structure.

Another example of a search warrant our SWAT team conducted occurred after our department created its explosive breaching team. The warrant was conducted at a hotel that had metal door that was difficult to breach using traditional methods such as a battering ram. In addition to having a fortified door, the suspects inside the room were reported to have handguns and were wanted for maintaining a drug premises. After receiving the briefing from narcotics it was decided that we would use an explosive charge to breach the door. A standard water bag charge was made to breach the door. The search warrant was conducted at night and was video recorded to place in the investigative file. As one of the four-team members assigned to the Explosive breaching team my task was to utilize the ballistic shield to block the overpressure from the rest of the entry team. The charge was detonated and blew the door of the hinges. As the first team member to enter the hotel room I observed two suspects on the ground in a mild state of confusion. I also observed two handguns on a table in the corner of the hotel room. The explosive charge worked very effectively stunning the suspects inside the room. No injuries were sustained to any of the involved parties (police/suspects). Had traditional methods been used to breach the door a different outcome could have resulted. The next topic that I will address is the element of surprise. Element of surprise has a direct connection to officer safety; however, it does deserve some discussion on its own.

ELEMENT OF SURPRISE

The correlation between officer safety and element of surprise was addressed in a lesson plan that was completed by the Phoenix Police Department. In the lesson plan on Explosive Entry/Building Operations the following was stated as a purpose to use explosive breaching techniques: “To create shock and stun suspects inside a stronghold. This breaching method reduces the danger to the entry team.” As stated in my earlier example, using explosives creates a stunning technique that allows the SWAT team more time to react during a volatile encounter. The Phoenix police Department also considers the use of an Explosive breach for the following reason: “To gain speed when hostages’ lives are in jeopardy or when the recovery of vital evidence, which might be destroyed by the suspects is sought. “The short time it takes to do detonate an explosive charge could be the difference between a dead officer(s) and hostage(s). The element of surprise is something that all police administrators should consider when implementing an explosive breaching plan.

MEDICAL CONCERNS (INJURIES)

Police work is an inherently dangerous career and even more dangerous when explosives are used in tactical situations. In a recent article in The Tactical Edge, Spring 2002, entitled “Explosions and Blast Injuries: Dealing with the Terrorist Threat”, the authors Dr. Marvin Greenberg, and Dr. John Wipfler describe the physical properties of a bomb blast as the following: “Most authorities will agree that an explosion may be described as ‘a rapid release of high-pressure gas into the environment.’ This energy is released as a blast or shock wave, heat, and flying debris.” As stated earlier our main concern should be on officer

safety, however, the potential for injury does exist to all parties involved. To reduce the liability and prepare for the unexpected the Little Rock Police Department SWAT team has several paramedics and one Medical Doctor that respond to crisis situations and the execution of high-risk warrants. In the policies and procedures of the San Diego Police Department they addressed the issues of medical concerns by implementing the following policy and procedure: “STAR Team paramedics should be present during SWAT missions when explosive breaching techniques are to be used. Personnel trained in advanced first-aid should be present during training when explosives are used.” To this date the Little Rock Police Department has completed a total of three live operations involving the use of explosives and none of these have resulted in injuries. However, injuries have occurred with other agencies. In a survey conducted by the Colorado Springs Police Department they contacted one hundred agencies and the following results were noted. A total of 184 live operations were conducted by various agencies with a total of 4 resulting in injury (2.17%). Out the 184 live operations a total of 2 resulted in lawsuits (1.09%). The survey does not disclose the outcome of the lawsuits.

PLANNING

Before conducting any tactical operation a considerable amount of planning must be done to determine how the mission should be carried out. The most important part of the planning phase would be gathering intelligence. This is most important when using an explosive charge because the type structure or door that is involved will determine what explosives should be used to accomplish a successful breach. For example, the two warrants that I have participated in where an explosive charge was used involved a water charge. This

type of charge should be used on a residential door with foam interior. Proper planning and training will also eliminate the possibility of lawsuits. The planning phase should involve someone from the explosive breaching team as well as someone that actually has knowledge of the structure. When planning for an explosive breach there will be several instances when explosives should not be utilized. In the lesson plan prepared by the Phoenix police Department they will not use explosives when the planning phase identifies the following situations:

- Any time where flammable chemicals are present-includes drug labs.
- Buildings that store explosives or volatile chemicals
- Factories that may contain paints fuel oils, thinners, etc.
- Situations involving old people or young children.
- Situations where the door or wall construction is not known.
- Situations where hostages are in close proximity to the breach point.

These exceptions are stated to reduce the possibility of injuries to officers and other parties involved. After a successful planning phase is done the next area of importance would be the execution and rehearsal phase.

EXECUTION AND REHERSAL

The execution and rehearsal phases are a vital part of a successful operation. In an article in The Tactical Edge Fall 2000, this is addressed in an article that was written By

Charles O’Conner and Ben Tisa. They recommend that before an operation is conducted a checklist should be completed to determine what actions are warranted during an operation. The Phoenix Police Department places major emphasis on the execution phase by stating that you should describe how the plan is to be accomplished. Once your team has decided how to execute the explosive breach the mission should be rehearsed. The Phoenix Police Department states the following to all personnel that completes their explosive training course: “Hostage rescue interventions are too complex and too important to leave anything to chance. Your life as well as the hostages are in jeopardy from the instant of intervention until after the rescue.” The rehearsal phase is as close to the live operation as you can get before the actual execution is performed. To be as realistic as possible the rehearsal phase should be done utilizing all tactical equipment and real time. Before going any further I will explain the responsibilities of each of the four-team members assigned to the explosive breaching team. Explaining the role of each person will help the police administrator understand how a successful explosive breach is carried out. The information obtained for this portion of the report was taken from curriculum that is taught by the Tactical Explosive Entry School (TEES).

KEY RESPONSIBILITIES (1ST FOUR POSITIONS)

- 1. COVERMAN-** without a doubt, the most important man during the approach phase. His task is to cover the area of the area of the expected threat. His weapon, be it a handgun, shotgun, or submachine-gun should be in the low ready position and aimed toward the area of concern.

2. **CHARGE PLACER**- responsible for carrying the charge and firing device. It is important that the firing device be carried in the inside hand (hand closest to the wall).
3. **FIRER**-responsible for firing the charge
4. **SHIELD MAN**-carries the blast deflection shield.

The information provided was a brief summary of the responsibilities of each team member assigned to the four-man breaching team. I will provide more detailed information on the topic of training later in this text.

The next topic that deserves a considerable amount of discussion is developing a comprehensive policy and procedure on the use of explosives. The importance of a comprehensive policy was addressed in an article in The Tactical Edge in the fall 2000 issue. The authors stated the following: “Any agency performing explosive breaching without approved written policies and procedures is opening the agency to potential litigation regardless of the levels of intervention and successful resolution of incidents.” I contacted various police agencies from around the country to see how their policies were written. The departments that provided the most useful information were the San Diego Police Department and the Phoenix Police Department. The primary person responsible for writing the policy and procedure should have extensive documented training in the handling of explosives. Charles O’Conner and Ben Tisa noted the following problem with many agencies that implement an explosive breaching plan: “Currently, many agencies have

existing programs that fall short of contemporary standards. This is due to many reasons. Most officers aren't specifically trained to develop a thorough program."

Lieutenant Steve Clift wrote the policy and procedure that the San Diego Police Department is currently using. Lieutenant Clift sent me a fax when I was researching policies and he stated the following comment: "We try to keep things as general as possible without being ambiguous. If you get too specific it becomes easy to paint yourself into a corner." The Little Rock Police Department addresses the following areas in its policies and procedures on explosive breaching. The policies are more detailed than stated below; I am giving an account of what is covered under the stated heading:

- Authorization: All explosive breaches will have prior approval of the SWAT Unit Commander or a SWAT Unit supervisor acting in the Commander's absence.
- Training: All SWAT Unit personnel will be trained in the safe handling, transportation, storage, and use of the explosives used in tactical breaching devices.
- Safety: Explosives must be handled and utilized with utmost safety at all times. Tactical explosives are safe when utilized by trained personnel who are following prescribed procedures. Safety is broken down into the following four distinct areas: during transportation, during storage, during training, and during tactical operations.
- Storage procedures (will be discussed later in this report)
- Tactical planning: Each aspect of the tactical breaching operation must be planned prior to deployment of a tactical explosive breaching device.

- Documentation: Every use of a tactical explosive breaching charge, either in training or in tactical operations, will be documented and assigned a shot number.

Each of the areas stated above are covered in our policies and procedures. When helping write the policies that our Department is currently using I received input from a number of different agencies. The agencies that I contacted in regards their explosive breaching policies, were very helpful in providing a basis for the policy that are Department is currently using. If and when your Department implements an explosive breaching policy, I would recommend that you solicit input from various agencies and then adapt a policy and procedure that meets the standards and mission of your Department.

When considering implementation of an explosive breaching plan many areas must be considered. A number of areas were previously discussed and we will now focus on the some of the negatives associated with the implementation of an explosive breaching plan. The first areas that we will discuss are issues concerning training.

TRAINING RELATED ISSUES

Training is a major area that is worthy of discussion for several reasons. First, to have a successful explosive breaching program it is necessary that all officers responsible for the explosive breach receive proper training. This was a point that was addressed in The Tactical Edge, fall 2000 issue. The authors Charles O'Connor and Ben Tisa stated the following in regards to training issues: "Failure to properly certify the breachers can result in costly litigation against the agency for failure to properly train tactical team personnel."

The training that the officers receive should be from a credible course that covers all areas of tactical breaching (O'Connor, C., & Tisa, B.). In determining where officers should receive training the above mentioned authors state the following in the article titled "Establishing a Tactical Explosive Breaching Program": "The selected breachers must attend a credible course of instruction designed to present all aspects of tactical breaching procedures and proper standard of care for execution protocols. This training must be recognized as certified, advanced officer course."

When the Little Rock Police Department implemented its explosive breaching plan every member assigned to the SWAT team received extensive training in two areas. The first area that must be mastered before an officer can use explosives is successfully passing an Explosive Handlers Course. In an Explosive Handlers Course a number of topics are covered. This course starts very basic and gets more involved as the class progresses. The course that I attended was taught by two Little Rock Police Officers that are certified instructors on the use of explosives. The original course was three days in length. To ensure that members remain current and familiar with the use of explosives additional training is conducted each quarter. In the fall 2000 issue of The Tactical edge the authors stated the following comment about proper training: "Thoroughly document each explosive shot performed by the breachers. This will establish a history of the program as well as the professionalism of the breachers and the program." As with any training program documentation is essential to reduce the Department's liability. The training the SWAT team receives at the Little Rock Police Department is stored in a secure facility and copies of all training files are forwarded to the Training Division.

The initial phase of an explosive breaching plan is very costly and requires both money and personnel committed to the successful implementation of such a plan. The area that I will discuss next is the storage of explosives.

STORAGE AND EXPLOSIVES PURCHASE

Before our department implemented its explosive breaching plan, extensive research and planning was done in an attempt to find an adequate place to store explosives. The chain of command decided that it would be best to store the explosives at our training facility. The cost of the storage bunkers where the explosives are stored cost over ten thousand dollars to build. The Little Rock Police Department was fortunate to have enough money to build two bunkers that are fenced with an alarm system. Two bunkers are necessary because the blasting caps have to be separated from the primary explosives. The proper storage for explosives is needed and was addressed in The Tactical Edge, fall 2000 issue. The authors stated the following in regards to storage: "Before an agency can legally purchase explosives, it must possess a storage facility in compliance with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF) and OSHA standards. The rules the BATF require are very specific and can be in the ATF- Explosives Law and Regulation manual.

The purchases of explosives are expensive and require a large amount of money and time before a purchase can be made. Before a purchase can be made it is important to find out what permits and licensing your state requires. Once your department has the necessary license and permits the purchase of explosives can be made. The Little Rock Police

Department made an initial eight thousand dollar purchase of explosives. The explosive will last a relatively long time depending on how much training your department conducts.

CONCLUSION

The use of explosives is a necessary tool that departments of all size should use (O'Connor, C., & Tisa, B). The information provided in this report should be useful to your department as it considers implementing a tactical explosive breaching plan. The most important thing to remember is that the use of explosives in crisis situations may be the only resource needed to prevent an officer from being murdered. In special threat situations it is critical that entry is gained as quickly as possible to reduce the likelihood of officers and hostages being shot.