

What is the Future of SWAT Teams in Law Enforcement?

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Abstract

This project was undertaken to look at what role future Special Weapons and Tactics Teams (SWAT) will play in law enforcement. After reading many current newspaper and magazine articles, the only way to find out what the future held was to interview visionaries. After conducting interviews with several chiefs of police, the information received revealed some surprises. This project will show that SWAT teams do indeed have a future in law enforcement. Based on the information obtained from the interviews, it was found that as our society breeds more violent criminals, street gangs, domestic terrorists, and hate groups, there will be a definite need for better trained, equipped, and funded SWAT teams of the future.

Introduction

Throughout the history of American law enforcement, the police officer was required to be many things to many people. Besides being a minister, social worker, and keeper of the peace, the lawman had to be someone that had the courage to take his weapon in hand and confront the armed criminal. This task was handled by the regular street officer and handled well through the 1800's and up until the mid-1900's.

Society in America was undergoing some major changes in the 1960's and this created social unrest. To handle these situations and a rising crime problem, police agencies created special teams that could be deployed in high crime areas as well as respond to civil disorders. These teams were referred to as rapid response teams, flex teams, STOP squads, and other monikers. Although the names varied, the concept was clear. The need was for rapid deployment of manpower able to address an unusual situation.

On August 1, 1966 in Austin, Texas, Charles Whitman climbed the tower at the University of Texas. Just before noon, from the top of this 28 story building, Whitman went on a shooting rampage killing 15 people and wounding 31 more on the campus below. The incident ended when two Austin police officers climbed the tower and killed Whitman.

This was not unnoticed in law enforcement and in that same year (1966), the Los Angeles Police Department took the brainchild of Sergeant John Nelson supported by a young commander named Daryl Gates, and formed the Special Weapons and Tactics Unit and thus SWAT was born. (Blackburn, 1996)

The next few years grew more violent in America. In 1973, the whole country watched as the Los Angeles Police Department SWAT team took on the Symbionese Liberation Army in what was probably the single largest shootout in U.S. Law Enforcement history until the Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) tragedy at Waco, Texas twenty years later.

Since these incidents, just about all law enforcement agencies have formed SWAT teams or at least have access to them. The National Tactical Officers Association's Executive Director Larry Glick states that although he does not have exact statistics he would estimate that there are approximately 5,000 SWAT teams in the United States. (L. Glick, personal communication, 1996)

SWAT teams are a recognized necessity of law enforcement. Many administrators give these teams other names such as Special Response Team, Quick Response Team,

Emergency Response Team, and Special Operations Team, but the job is the same. Due to recent events in our country involving the use or perceived misuse of SWAT teams by law enforcement, there has been significant public outcry about the appearance and tactics used by these teams (various newspaper articles, 1995-96).

This writer has an extensive background in SWAT and because of the rising tide of anti-SWAT articles in newspapers, and on television saw a compelling need to seek answers to the following questions.

1. How does the public perceive SWAT teams?
 - A. Is the image positive?
 - B. Is the image negative?
 - C. Rescuer or Gestapo?
2. How are SWAT teams perceived by law enforcement administrators?
 - A. Are SWAT teams necessary?
 - B. Will they continue to be funded?
 - C. Why would you eliminate your team?
3. Will SWAT teams be used more or less in the future?
 - A. What will drive this decision?
 - B. Crime
 - C. Technology
4. Will future technology enable us to abolish SWAT teams in law enforcement?
 - A. Will the need for a trained SWAT Officer to engage a perpetrator be eliminated?
 - B. Is there a ray gun or disabling device in the future?
5. If these teams were abolished, what would be the consequences on law enforcement and the public they serve?
 - A. Would the average officer be able to handle all situations?
 - B. Will we just write off some incidents as unmanageable?

The bulk of the literature reviewed was taken from newspaper and magazine articles. The articles for the most part provided no real information on current SWAT team usage or on projected uses in the future. The entire subject has been seriously neglected by writers in general and especially by law enforcement writers.

The articles and stories found were mostly press accounts of the ATF's handling of the incidents at Waco, Texas, and Ruby Ridge, Idaho. This material certainly points out serious problems surrounding the federal teams and their rules of engagement. However, these articles for the most part do not address the thousands of other SWAT teams around the country and their deployment.

Last, but not least, the largest gap found in the research is the lack of futurist writings concerning SWAT teams and their use or lack of it in the future. Not one futurist article was found on the subject.

Due to the lack of printed futurist writings on SWAT teams, the decision was made to interview police administrators. These people are in a good position to get public feedback and opinions. They also control the direction and spending of law enforcement agencies. Their educated opinions should certainly shed light on this problem and give a look at what is in store in the future.

Methods

Interviews were conducted with ten Florida police chiefs and two private weapons industry experts. The data were collected by conducting taped phone interviews. In these interviews, the same questions were asked of all participants however, most felt compelled to interject personal opinions on one topic or another. The ten Florida police chiefs were selected on the basis of service to a community of 250,000 or less.

The strength in the data collected was that it is coming from law enforcement professionals at the top of their agencies. These people have to have a finger on the pulse of society as well as an eye to the future.

The weakness, of course, is that these chiefs are indeed human and capable of being wrong and making mistakes. Since this research deals with people and personal opinion, there is no real scientific test or equation to prove a case one way or the other.

Results

On the question of "How are SWAT teams perceived by the public?" at least half of those interviewed felt that the public viewed SWAT teams in a negative manner; either as a "Gestapo" or as a necessary evil.

The question of "How are SWAT teams perceived by law enforcement administration?" was almost one hundred percent the same. SWAT teams are a necessary evil and a high liability for a department. Most chiefs of police would turn over that responsibility to someone else if they could.

"Will SWAT teams be used more or less in the future?" was answered the same way by all except one chief of police. SWAT teams will definitely be used more.

On the question of "Will future technology enable us to abolish SWAT teams?" all the chiefs surveyed responded the same emphatic **no**.

"If these teams are abolished what would be the consequences to law enforcement and to the public they serve?" Overall the response from those surveyed spelled out sure disaster for the average officer and for the unsuspecting public.

The findings on "How SWAT teams are perceived by the public?" showed the widest and most varied response. One response was "I don't think anybody thinks of them until there's an incident" (K. Chandler, personal communication, 1996). This may be true for the average working person as well as the idea that, "For the most part they don't understand the function and necessity of having those teams" (J. Mahar, personal communication, 1996)

On the other extreme, the cry is heard that "they are the Gestapo and ill trained and probably gun-happy" (W. Liquori, personal communication, 1996). This opinion was supported by other responses such as, "I think the public perception is that they are sort of bullies of law enforcement." (C. Reynolds, personal communication, 1996). The other responses included everything from "necessary" to "good viable tool" (Liquori, personal communication, 1996). The study points out that there are a wide range of public opinions on this question and that law enforcement has failed in the job to properly educate the public about SWAT teams and their function in a law enforcement agency.

On the question of "How are SWAT teams perceived by law enforcement administrators?," the majority of responses were along the lines of "as a distinct necessary" (J. Waldron, personal communication, 1996), or ". . . as a necessary evil that's something

that you need to have and if you're gonna do it, you got to do it right" (M. Tyre, personal communication, 1996)

The study revealed that although law enforcement administrators viewed SWAT teams as an important necessity, they would gladly turn over the responsibility and cost to another agency if they could. The future implications are that smaller agencies will turn over these responsibilities to larger agencies and that the possibility of multi-agency SWAT teams is on the way. This would give agencies a chance to spread out the cost of training, equipping, and maintaining a team.

The question as to whether SWAT teams will be used more or less in the future was answered the same way by all except one surveyed. **Yes**, SWAT teams will be utilized more. Responses such as "I think it's going to be necessary to use them more because I think our society is becoming more and more violent" (T. Surrency, personal communication, 1996) validate that SWAT teams will be increasingly needed. All the chiefs with the exception of one indicated that they felt the future holds more violent crime, street gangs, better-armed criminals, and more radical groups.

The future implications for SWAT are plain. We must provide better-equipped and trained teams to face a more violent future. This will enable us to resolve more violent situations with less loss of life in our society.

On the question, "Will future technology enable us to abolish SWAT teams?" the answers were the same--**no**. All interviewed felt that new technology is coming and it will alter the way SWAT teams work but the need for these teams will always be there.

As Chief Westgate put it, "Obviously there will always be the need for a grunt, but what the grunt does though may change in the future" (R. Westgate, personal communication, 1996). The implications for the future are a well-trained team armed with different devices that will aid in more peaceful resolution in some incidents. There are many things on the workbench now around the world such as sound guns, tranquilizers, and other types of immobilizers (W. Burroughs, personal communication, 1996) but practical field application is still years away.

When the question was asked, "If these teams are abolished what would be the consequences to law enforcement and to the public they serve?," the responses were all the same - "**devastating**" (M. Tyre, personal communication, 1996).

Abolishing SWAT teams would make the job far more dangerous for the average police officer and make the citizen more vulnerable in dangerous situations where SWAT officers are usually deployed.

The study provided feedback from those at the top that the future will still have law enforcement agencies with SWAT teams as the cost to our society would be too great if we abolished them.

Discussion

After reviewing assorted newspaper articles, magazines, and other professional journals, it was found that most of the anti-SWAT stories were based on the Ruby Ridge and Waco tragedies involving federal SWAT teams (ATF and FBI). The daily work done by SWAT teams around the country for the most part goes unreported unless there is a mistake made or a life taken.

The lack of written material on this subject from a futurist point of view is disturbing but not unexpected. This is true based on the following:

1. SWAT is a specialized area of law enforcement in which the vast majority of police officers never participate.
2. Due to the small number of officers involved in the field, the pool of writers would naturally be small.
3. The writers from this field tend to write more technical, or how-to, articles either on tactics or weapons.
4. Most SWAT personnel are not inclined to share their experiences because of negative feedback from police administrators and the press.
5. Team personnel worry about public perception.

This study, through the use of interviews with law enforcement administrators, has shown that SWAT teams do have a negative perception by the public. This, in part, is due to negative media coverage (only the bad news sells) and, on the other hand, is attributed to the extremely poor job that law enforcement has done in educating the public as to the SWAT mission and their real job within the law enforcement community.

Research has pointed out that the law enforcement community deems SWAT a necessary evil. There are many concerns by administrators on the liability of having a SWAT team and of the consequences of not having one.

All the information received on future technology and its effect on SWAT teams' future is that there will be a place for SWAT teams in law enforcement future. Technology may change the job but it will not eliminate the need for an intelligent, thinking, resourceful, and, yes, risk-taking person.

This project showed that even though administrators looked at SWAT as a necessary evil, they all realized the importance of the job. Administrators all predicted disaster for law enforcement and society in general if SWAT teams were abolished.

The future of SWAT teams in law enforcement is assured by futurists predicting that the next decade will hold the following:

- Better armed criminals.
- Bigger and more violent street gangs.
- More extremists and hate groups.
- Increased violent crimes.

What this means for future SWAT teams is clear. The future requires better-equipped and highly trained personnel who will be utilized more frequently to handle increasingly violent situations.

This study points out that the current trend for small agencies to eliminate their SWAT teams as a way of relieving the tremendous financial liability that goes with them will continue. There will be an increase in larger agencies providing SWAT services for smaller jurisdictions.

Another trend that will continue to grow in the future is the concept of multi-agency SWAT teams. In areas where you have several small municipalities in close proximity this is very advantageous. All the agencies share in the cost of training and maintaining the team without the intense loss of manpower from the street.

In closing, it is obvious to anyone analyzing this research data that law enforcement's future holds a place for better equipped, highly trained, tactical specialists, that will comprise S.W.A.T teams of the future.

Captain Roy Hudson began his law enforcement career in 1972 with the Baltimore City Police Department. He has been with the St. Lucie County Sheriff's Office since 1982, where he has served as Patrol Deputy, Shift Sergeant, Lieutenant in the Tactical Enforcement Unit, and Uniformed Patrol Commander prior to his current assignments as the Commander of the of the Special Investigations Division and as the Special Operations and Tactical Team Commander. His interests are in SWAT operations and narcotics enforcement. He is an expert witness in the areas of narcotics, firearms and tactical operations. Roy is a graduate of the 88th session of the Southern Police Institute Administrative Officers Course.

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- Liquori, W., Chief, Altamonte Springs Police Department
- Mahar, J., Chief, Ft. Pierce Police Department
- Reynolds, C., Chief, Port St. Lucie Police Department
- Smith, G., Smith and Wesson
- Surrency, T., Chief, Plant City Police Department
- Tyre, M., Chief, Juno Beach Police Department
- Waldron, J., Chief, Stuart Police Department
- Westgate, R., Chief, Jupiter Police Department