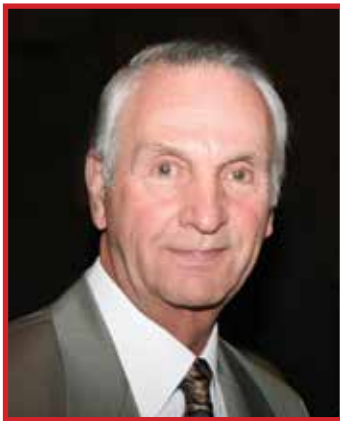


# THE INTERVIEW: JOHN KOLMAN



**N**TOA founder John Kolman has likely influenced tactical law enforcement operations and command thinking longer than any other individual in this profession. He could easily be considered “Commander Zero,” the source of much of the logic, philosophy and values that so many of us base our decision-making on today. So what if you had an opportunity to sit down and pick his brain for a few minutes? Well, we did and he graciously agreed to be the focus of this installment of “The Interview.” With close to 50 years of SWAT history and background to share, John had much to impart to our readers.

**Q: How did your involvement during the late 1960s in the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's Special Enforcement Bureau (SEB) help place SEB's teams among the top SWAT teams in the country?**

*A: Aside from being a team leader (sergeant) from 1969-1973, and SWAT commander (lieutenant) from 1977-1981, my involvement in advancing the quality and proficiency of the teams primarily involved training. Early on, I made an unscheduled, unannounced visit to LAPD SWAT at the old Georgia Street Station (SWAT headquarters at the time). I don't remember the name of the SWAT officer who greeted me, but one of the first things I said was, "How come you guys don't train with the sheriff's SWAT guys?" This visit was also my introduction to then-SWAT officer Michael Hillmann, later deputy chief, and still a close friend of SEB. That day was the beginning of many years of joint LAPD/SEB SWAT training and friendships that continue to the present day. Today, both teams know they can rely on each other for assistance at any time — and have done so on many occasions.*

*Without a doubt, this extensive joint training conducted over the years, as well as the close relationship and training with specialized military teams, helped place LAPD and LASD/SEB teams among the top police SWAT teams in the United States.*

**Q: What compelled you in 1982 to author the book, "A Guide to the Development of Special Weapons and Tactics Teams"?**

*A: During my time at the Special Enforcement Bureau, and especially my second tour from 1977-1981, SEB received so many calls, letters, and visits from police and sheriff's departments throughout the United States relative to SWAT. I came to the conclusion that a textbook on SWAT was long overdue. Only one textbook was available at the time, and it was written from the perspective of the military. I believed from the beginning that integrating military terminology and tactics within SWAT could cause problems in the future — and it has. That doesn't mean SWAT shouldn't train with and learn from the military; only that team members and superiors alike must be able to intelligently justify SWAT training, weapons and other equipment, including armored vehicles. It is interesting to note that for some time the military has wisely and*

*openly solicited training from selected law enforcement SWAT teams. For example, SWAT schools conducted by LASD/SEB almost always include members of the military. In my opinion, this relationship has been mutually beneficial and should continue. Much has changed since my first book was published in 1982, but it is probably still of some value to those who are interested in examining the origins and advancements of the SWAT concept. I believe my second book on SWAT, "The Trials and Tribulations of Becoming a SWAT Commander," should be required reading for all prospective SWAT commanders.*

**Q: How did your experience at SEB lead to the creation of the NTOA?**

*A: The many calls, letters and visits to SEB that I mentioned not only prompted the writing of "A Guide to the Development of Special Weapons and Tactics Teams," but also spawned the idea of sharing tactical-related information among tactical teams on a nationwide basis. In order to assess the level of support for the creation of an association comprised exclusively of tactical teams and individual team members, past or present, letters of inquiry were sent to tactical teams throughout the United States. Response to these letters was overwhelmingly favorable. As a result, the National Tactical Officers Association was created in July 1983.*

**Q: How do you think the NTOA has influenced law enforcement tactical operations in this country?**

*A. The influence of the National Tactical Officers Association in providing training and information to tactical teams throughout the United States has been recognized almost from the association's inception in 1983. Today, the ability of NTOA to disseminate tactical and related information through electronic or printed media ensures that tactical teams remain current in the field of tactical operations. NTOA's award-winning professional journal, The Tactical Edge, regularly scheduled training courses and annual conferences provide additional guidance to those teams which desire to further develop expertise in this important field.*

**Q: Do you feel the challenges that today's SWAT teams face are any different than when you started?**

*A: Yes, I do feel they are different. During the early days of SWAT there were no groups, so-called academicians, or the ACLU challenging the existence of SWAT. Because the concept of SWAT was so new, the media coverage was for the most part positive. The few actual deployments were successful, and were reported as such by the media. One of the biggest challenges for early teams was getting units of their respective departments to request their assistance. Both patrol and detective units often handled barricade situations and/or warrant services internally and were understandably reluctant to surrender these responsibilities to others. It was not until department policy mandated units to request the use of SWAT under specific circumstances that acceptance of SWAT began to take place.*

**Q: What one piece of advice would you give every new SWAT commander?**

*A: In my opinion, every new SWAT commander should plan for the eventuality that sooner or later a designated or non-designated superior officer or executive is going to "visit" the scene of a SWAT operation, and after being briefed, may strongly disagree with the team's planned course of action — a plan perhaps developed by the experienced team leader and approved by the new SWAT commander. My one piece of advice to a new SWAT commander confronted by the hypothetical situation related above would be to have the courage to say and do what you believe is right under the circumstances.*

*Hopefully, the new SWAT commander will be able to convince the superior(s) through logic, policy and procedure, past practices and the team's previous successes. However, in an extreme case, the new SWAT commander may have to be more forceful and advise the superior that the planned course of action was developed after evaluating all reasonable options, and further that it is his intention to implement it unless given a direct order to the contrary. Any such order would of course be duly noted in the SWAT and operations log. Unfortunately, SWAT commanders who exhibit this kind of courage will undoubtedly alienate some superiors, perhaps even reducing their future chances for*

*promotion. It is unfortunate that the position of SWAT commander is seen by some as a springboard to promotion. This person may be less likely to oppose, verbally or otherwise, a superior's suggestions or opposition than would a SWAT commander who believes in doing what he feels is right. ■*

### AN INTERESTING SIDELIGHT

I became a member of the Special Enforcement Bureau as a sergeant in 1969. Both LAPD and the Sheriff's Department (LASD) SEB developed fledgling teams as early as 1966, but those teams were seldom deployed. Today, few realize that there is documented evidence that SED, the predecessor of SEB, established a Special Weapons Unit in 1963. Team members received special training, but there are no records indicating they were ever deployed to an actual incident. When I arrived in 1969, the same firearms used by teams in 1963 were still being deployed: .45-cal. Thompson submachine guns, .45-cal. Reising submachine guns (both WWII vintage), 12-gauge Winchester M97 shotguns and even Model 94 Winchester .30-30-cal. saddle-ring, lever-action rifles! The only contemporary firearm assigned to selected team members then was the superb Model 40XB Remington sniper rifle (.308-cal.) — the same sniper rifle being used in Vietnam at the time. Ultimately, the administration approved trading the obsolete weapons for brand new AR15 rifles. The firearms dealers involved were ecstatic, because they knew well the value of the vintage weapons the department was trading.

In 1981, as a result of a fortuitous phone call from Heckler & Koch, all SEB Special Weapons Teams received the entire line of H&K firearms at no cost!