

# FIRST STEPS IN K9/SWAT INTEGRATION

BY BRAD SMITH



When a SWAT team decides to integrate a patrol dog into a SWAT environment, they often jump into scenario-based training without preparing the dog for what is about to happen. One of the issues teams face is getting the dog accustomed to how members look in bulky gear. Some dogs become confused when they are suddenly thrown into a tactical situation in which SWAT officers are kitted out quite differently than they are during training.

Dogs are pack animals, and they are accustomed to seeing their pack dressed as patrol officers. Suddenly, new members of the pack, the SWAT operators, appear in bulky tactical vests, helmets, and shoulder and arm protection. To a K9, those officers can look just like a decoy wearing bite equipment. It does not take long for a dog to become accustomed to the look of its new pack, but problems will occur if advance preparation is not undertaken before the first training. If you jump right into a full-scale K9 SWAT training scenario — or worse, into a real-world K9 SWAT deployment — without first in-

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roducing a dog to its new pack, it will be very interested in how the SWAT operators are dressed. The dog will spend more time sniffing and looking at the SWAT operators than searching. A dog also could bite an operator because it is not used to the SWAT gear.

So how do you get a dog accustomed to the protective gear the SWAT team wears? The easiest way I know

of is what I call “tactical obedience.” I have all SWAT team members put on their helmets, tactical vests, shoulder and arm protection, leg protection, shoulder weapons and any other equipment they may carry on an operation. They are then instructed to stand in a single-file line, double arm’s distance apart, giving the K9 handler room to maneuver between them.

The handler should put on all of his or her protective equipment as well, including helmet, vest and sidearm. Depending on the dog’s temperament, the handler can decide whether to do this obedience exercise with the dog muzzled or unmuzzled. In my experience, most handlers do not need to muzzle their dogs. However, if you have any doubts about how your dog will perform around the SWAT operators, play it safe and muzzle the dog.

## **TACTICAL OBEDIENCE: WALKING FIGURE EIGHTS**

Make sure you have the dog’s favorite toy available before starting the obedience. You can take a few minutes to

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play with the dog using the toy to work out some of its pent-up energy. After a few minutes of play, it is time for tactical obedience. I am not simply talking about walking your dog through the SWAT operators; I am talking about hard, strict, on-leash obedience, with the dog paying attention to you and not the others.

Do not heel the dog through the SWAT operators with a tight leash. When the leash is tight, the dog does not learn anything except that it cannot go any farther than the leash will allow.

I expect the dog to heel with a loose leash, as if it were off leash. I realize that is a novel concept for some handlers, but everything starts with obedience and control. If you cannot control your dog, you should not be deploying with SWAT.

For the next several minutes, do nonstop figure eights through the entire line of SWAT operators. Once you get to the end, reward your dog with its toy. Take a few seconds to play with your dog and then start the exercise over again. Remember, dogs do not

work for free. That is why we give them their toy at the end of each tactical heeling session.

Some dogs are excited when they come out of the car. If you need to get your dog in the proper frame of mind before you start this exercise, take the time to do so. If, at any point during the exercise, your dog is not paying attention to you or is looking at one of the SWAT members, use a hard correction followed by praise when the dog is doing what it is supposed to do. Once again, after you figure eight all the way through the line, reward the dog with its favorite toy. Depending on your dog's level of training, you may have to do the exercise several times before the dog is under control and is neutral to the SWAT operators.

The next step in tactical obedience is to have the operators go from a



standing position to a kneeling position. Once again, perform on-leash tactical heeling in a figure-eight pattern through the line. Make sure the dog is paying strict attention to you, because the dog's face is now much closer to the operators' faces. If you need to give your dog a correction during the pattern, do so, but also praise your dog when it returns to a good heel. At the end of each session, reward your dog with its toy.

### **TACTICAL OBEDIENCE: BODY CONTACT**

The next phase of this exercise is to have the SWAT operators sitting on the ground with their legs stretched out in front of them and crossed at the ankles. This time, walk the dog directly over their legs instead of in a figure-eight pattern. That gets the dog used to having to stepping over the operators and puts them outside its comfort zone. Once again, this is a heeling

exercise, so do not let your dog pull you or lag behind. Also, do not let the dog walk around the operators; it must jump over their legs. Once the dog is accustomed to stepping or jumping over their legs, it is time to put the dog even further outside its comfort zone.

The next phase of tactical obedience is to have the dog lie down on the legs of the SWAT operators. In a real operation, would we want the dog to do this? No, not usually, but better to put the dog in a difficult position in training so that if such a scenario ever did happen in the street, both the dog and the team member would be comfortable in that position.

Most dogs who do this exercise for the first time do not want to lie down on the officers' legs. Not only is it an unnatural position for the dog, it's also quite uncomfortable. As you are heeling over each SWAT operator, command the dog to "down" on his legs. That allows the dog to get used to his new pack, and it also allows the team members to become more comfortable with the dog in case this would happen in a real-life situation. It also shows them that the dogs will not bite them if this scenario is necessary.

Once the dog will lie down on the SWAT operators' legs, we then have them lie on their stomachs and have the K9 heel over them. This is similar to the previous exercise; however, now the operators are lying in a different position, and in the dog's mind they are possible prey. We need to teach the dog that if it comes up on a SWAT operator lying in this position, it should not bite him.

By this point, your dog should adjust fairly quickly to the SWAT operators' position. Once you have heeled your dog over the operators, start downing it on their backs or the back of their legs.



## TACTICAL OBEDIENCE: RECALL

When the dogs are accustomed to lying down on the SWAT operators, the final phase of tactical obedience is to start recalling the dog past the prone officers. Heel the dog up to the first operator and down the dog on his or her legs. Leave the dog in that position and move to the second operator. After 15 or 20 seconds, call the dog to you and, if need be, show the dog its toy to speed up the recall.

As long as the dog recalls to the handler and does not bite the second SWAT operator, training is going well. Leave the dog down on the operator and move to the fourth person in line. After 15 to 20 seconds, recall the dog, and if needed, show the dog its toy during the recall. It makes no difference whether the dog jumps over or goes around the third SWAT operator.

The main objective is to have the dog recall to your side and lie down on the fourth operator.

Leave the dog there and move to either the seventh or eighth operator. Wait for approximately 15 to 20 seconds and then recall the dog to your location. Ideally, your dog should jump over all of the SWAT operators to get to you. Once your dog has completed this exercise, be sure to reward it with its toy because, remember, dogs do not work for free.

In less than 30 minutes, you should be able to complete this exercise and get your dog used to being part of a new “SWAT pack.” It won’t hurt to do this exercise a few times a year, especially if any new operators join the team, so they will become accustomed to the dog as well. ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cpl. Brad Smith (ret.) was a canine handler and trainer for the West Covina (CA) PD for 25 years and a SWAT dog handler for 18 years. He is the NTOA’s canine section chair and a subject matter expert for the California Association of Tactical Officers. Smith designed and implemented S.K.I.D.D.S./CATS, a K9 SWAT and tactical school. He can be reached at [topdogwck1@aol.com](mailto:topdogwck1@aol.com).

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