

THE INTERVIEW: SGT. A.J. DEANDREA

Arvada Police Department (CO) and former Jefferson County Regional SWAT (1996-2012), NTOA Lead Instructor



Sgt. DeAndrea will present the following incident debriefs at our tactical conference in Louisville:

- **Columbine High School Massacre**
- **Platte Canyon High School Hostage Rescue**
- **“Youth With a Mission” Shooting**

In 1999, Sgt. A.J. DeAndrea was an entry team leader at Columbine High School, responsible for locating and removing students and staff from the school while also searching for gunmen who had killed 12 fellow students and a teacher. He was one of the team leaders during the 2004 Granby (CO) bulldozer rampage and rescued hostages during the Platte Canyon High School shooting in 2006. As one of the team leaders during another incident in which 30 rounds were fired, he helped rescue a fellow police officer. During the 2007 shooting at a Youth with a Mission training center in Arvada, DeAndrea helped rescue students with life-threatening injuries. Last year, Colorado’s Attorney General awarded DeAndrea the Excellence in Law Enforcement Award. DeAndrea is also the 2014 recipient of the prestigious NTOA John Kolman Award of Excellence for his ongoing contributions to the tactical community.

Q: What do you think prepared you the most for those critical incidents?

A: There are many things that help in the preparation to deal with critical incidents. I was blessed to have great mentors in the early part of my SWAT career who were excellent examples to follow. As my career continued and I became more involved with the NTOA, the senior instructors helped inspire me to look at our training practices and adapt them into our operational philosophy. With that said, I think any successes that I have experienced in a tactical situation have been based upon a foundation of training and understanding that these things can happen to anyone. I also believe that I've been willing to prepare for them appropriately. However, training is only part of it. In the NTOA's Team Leader Development course, we teach that your tactical competency comes from your training, coupled with your operational experience. So having the ability to learn from your past experiences and be critical of your past performance is crucial to being able to perform better when the next incident comes.

Q: What were the most important lessons learned from those incidents?

A: Probably the most important lesson learned was that these incidents can happen anywhere. When I was hired at Arvada PD in 1993, our city was the 12th safest city in the nation. I've come to recognize that tragic incidents such as these come without warning and are just as likely to occur in suburban areas as metropolitan. Quite often cops listen to critical incident debriefings as observers, instead of immersing themselves in the situation and imagining that it is happening to them in their jurisdiction. By truly listening to these debriefs and visualizing how each of us would react to a similar situation, we increase our response capability and our chances for success. The lesson is that it can happen anywhere, anytime — you need to be prepared.

Q: How did multi-jurisdictional cooperation play a role? And how has that changed over the years?

A: In any large, critical incident, multi-jurisdictional cooperation is essential. These events can eat up personnel and resources and ultimately exhaust an agency. In the past there was a lack of understanding in the difference between incident command and unified command and the importance of all involved agencies having a say in how the available resources should be deployed. Technology has changed, including communication to help manage these situations better, but again, without the proper training between the organizations involved the best laid plans and tools can all be for naught.

Q: As an instructor of the NTOA Team Leader Development course, what do you feel is the most challenging aspect of moving from an operator position to a team leader?

A: Moving from an operator to a team leader is challenging in a lot of ways. You have to recognize that you are no longer a peer but a leader, and you need to conduct yourself as such without alienating your team. There is an entire new skill set that needs to be developed with a burden that you are responsible for the entire team, not just your individual responsibilities on the team. Gaining the support of command and the operators can be tenuous. One of the responsibilities of the team leader is to evaluate the operational philosophy of the team to be sure the team's tactics are current. New team leaders can experience pressure from senior operators who may resist change from doing things the way they always have and quite often fixing those training scars can be daunting.

Q: Who do you feel new team leaders should be looking to as mentors?

A: New team leaders should be looking for a mentor who is going to enhance their personal development. This should be someone who has real-life experience but who is still willing to be a student. There is so much more than just tactics when it comes to running a team and a mentor should be well-rounded in all aspects of SWAT, leadership and law enforcement operations.

Q: Based on the threats that law enforcement tactical teams face today, what do you consider to be our training priorities?

A: First and foremost, a SWAT team's responsibility is to save lives; therefore, tactical teams should be evaluating their tactics against the best practices out there to be sure that they are current. The hostage rescue component of tactical operations is the pinnacle of what a tactical team may be called to do. However, the team leader needs to understand that not everything requires hostage rescue tactics. Mission-based planning and movement is critical to ensure the right tactics are being deployed based on the priorities of life, intelligence and operational environment. ■



We want to know what you think. Email editor@ntoa.org with feedback or questions about this article.