

THE INTERVIEW: MAJOR ED CANEVA

Miami-Dade Police Department



Major Ed Caneva has been with the Miami-Dade Police Department since 1993, serving on the SWAT team as an operator, sniper and team leader. In 2008, Caneva developed the nationally recognized Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) concept, a permanent unit responsible for circumstances involving life-threatening situations, civil disturbances, critical incidents and special events. Caneva has since served in command and advisory roles during RDF operations at the 2009 and 2013 inaugurations of President Barack Obama; the G20 Summit in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Super Bowl XLIV in Miami; the “Occupy Miami” eviction; and the George Zimmerman trial protests in Sanford, Florida. His current role is commander of the Seaport Operations Bureau at the busiest cruise port in the world, and he shares how his experience as a tactical officer shapes his thinking and actions today.



Q: What lessons early in your career as a SWAT officer have stayed with you today?

A: To be selected as a member of the SWAT team, or in my case, the Miami-Dade Special Response Team (SRT), is a great honor. It is also an opportunity, if approached correctly, to embark upon a rewarding career. My SRT experience provided me with an enriching educational journey through mentors, training courses, travel, friendships, challenges and work experiences. The emphasis placed on discipline, accountability and leadership development was crucial. On this score, I developed an ability to adapt a skill especially important in supervisory roles. I also learned that it was important to avoid assumptions, maintain control of information and dissect problems to the most minute detail. “What are the unknown unknowns?” the phrase made famous by Donald Rumsfeld, constantly resonated in my head. “What are we not prepared for?” and “What are you doing about it?” — these were questions I would ask myself. To test and evaluate proposed hypotheses regarding optimal engagement of tactics, techniques, equipment, policy and procedures is a top priority.

Throughout the mid-1990s, Miami-Dade County experienced a hijacked school bus incident and several inbound hijacked aircraft incidents. Overseas, French commandos stormed a hijacked aircraft in Marseilles, France, and Peruvian Special Forces stormed the Japanese Embassy in Lima, Peru. As a result, many of us in SRT took an interest in breaching capabilities, specifically as it related to means of transit: school buses, trains and aircrafts. Through networking, I was surprised to find that many proposed tactics circulating within the SWAT community had not been validated in practice. Explosive breaching concerned me the most. Such a proposal without understanding the consequences meant a serious gamble. I remember thinking, why not make the effort to train? So we found buses and aircrafts to test explosive breaching capabilities. Many of us ingrained a desire to continuously challenge untested policies, proposals, theories and training manuals. As my career progressed, on several occasions, this approach would bring trust, confidence, and ultimately, relief, to some tense situations which could have easily ended unfavorably.

Q: What led to your development of the RDF team concept?

A: In 2008, Major Greg Terp (retired), tasked me with proposing and spearheading a permanent Mobile Field Force (MFF) contingency within the Miami-Dade Police Department, in addition to the annual MFF training mandatory for MDPD personnel. Greg witnessed first-hand some of the horrors of the 1980 McDuffie Riots in

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Miami as a young K9 officer. He was concerned that a similar incident 30 years later could result in even greater devastation in Miami-Dade County if local law enforcement did not prepare accordingly.

I began studying some of the worst riots in history within the United States and abroad. I analyzed the immediate catalysts of riots as well as their deeper causes with a view to developing insights regarding planning, prevention measures and lessons learned. Upon discussing my findings and proposals, it was decided that aside from the department’s MFF and SWAT, there would be a group of officers throughout the department specially trained to deploy quickly to address civil disorder, man-made or natural disasters, special events or other spontaneous critical incidents.

Due to Miami’s history with hurricanes, floods and wildfires, we were also envisioning a humanitarian approach to public safety, working alongside the Miami-Dade Fire Department’s Search and Rescue Unit as well as with nonprofit organizations coordinated through the Office of Emergency Management. I thought of it as the Marine Corps within MDPD, strongly communicating its emphasis on maintaining peace, fostering community engagement, and, when necessary, taking steps to preserve order.

After bouncing around a few names and acronyms, the decision was made to call this new concept the Rapid Deployment Force (RDF). The assembled cadre of instructors who assisted in developing the two-week curriculum and the RDF concept comprised former and current SWAT officers. Sgt. Jose Ramirez and Officers Roberto Gill, Mike Madruga, and later Melvin Gonzalez, each had crucial roles in the development of the organization. Several weeks later, Greg took me to brief then-MDPD Director Robert Parker to present the RDF concept. After 45 minutes, the taciturn Director Parker, who was also witness to the horrors of the McDuffie Riots and a proponent of exploring new ideas in the interest of public safety, looked at us and said, “I like it. How quickly can you put this together?” Two months later the RDF was activated.

Q: What are you responsible for protecting in your current role at the Port of Miami?

A: PortMiami, also referred to as the “Cruise Capital of the World,” is the world’s leading port. In terms of trade and commerce, it is recognized as a “global gateway.” In 2015, PortMiami processed nearly 4.9 million multi-day passengers, more than any port in the world. It is also Miami-Dade County’s second most important economic engine, contributing \$28 billion annually to the local economy and supporting more than 207,000 jobs in South Florida.

In my current position, this equates to being accountable for the overall safety of citizens and passengers at the most critical infrastructure within Miami-Dade County, and perhaps the state of Florida. On a busy day, we can have as many as 45,000 people compressed into an island two miles in length by a half-mile in width. Therefore, any experienced public safety professional or emergency manager can clearly understand the vulnerabilities and complexities in addressing threats and critical incidents in such a confined area surrounded by water.

MDPD’s Seaport Operations Bureau (SOB) provides traditional police services to PortMiami, and supports the United States Coast Guard’s (USCG) Facility Security Plan (FSP), designed to protect the port facility and ships, people and cargo from the risks of a security incident. In addition, SOB has a general investigations unit, explosive detection K9s and a harbor patrol unit. Other specialized police services are provided through MDPD upon request. SOB also works closely with numerous public safety agencies, especially the United States Customs and Border Patrol, the USCG and Miami-Dade Fire Rescue, all permanently assigned within PortMiami.

In order to increase our level of protection, shortly after my arrival I began recruiting RDF and former SRT officers to develop an internal training section to ensure that officers with tactical expertise were deployed permanently throughout PortMiami in the event of a critical incident. The training section has been instrumental in clarifying the roles, responsibilities and vulnerabilities of all public safety partners, and developing or modifying training and incident command to address potential challenges from a realistic approach. For example, if SRT cannot arrive to a scene within a certain time frame, then our training emphasizes the same realization. The MDPD SRT and Marine Patrol Unit train frequently with the SOB’s Harbor Patrol Unit and other public safety partners to address maritime security concerns within the FSP, and to demonstrate the ability to board cruise ships during an emergency.

To ensure protection in such a busy port with so many moving parts and partnerships, it is imperative to constantly reevaluate our strategy and adapt accordingly. Comfort or avoiding criticism will only benefit the attacker. Training will be instrumental in preparing for success, but it must replicate reality as best as possible. And unless something occurs, measured training will be your bestselling point to influence change.

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Q: What are some of the toughest challenges facing SWAT today?

A: With so much publicity on the militarization of American police forces, SWAT commanders and police executives overseeing SWAT and MFFs must have a thorough understanding of their team’s policy and capability. They must communicate effectively as to when and why SWAT should be utilized. At conferences, I often hear that some teams across the country have insufficient funding and training. When they are misused or overly deployed, it can be a recipe for disaster.

SWAT commanders and police executives must present a stronger case for “public safety equipment” commonly referred to as “militarized equipment.” Prior to Sept. 11, 2001, I recall that MDPD’s SRT-issued equipment and weaponry was more advanced than those provided to soldiers and marines. Unlike the initial Humvees deployed in Iraq, our SRT trucks and BearCat had ballistic capabilities. Though the deployment of such assets can be controversial, the general public’s reaction was often positive. Many of them were thankful once they were reassured that these vehicles are utilized not only to transport SWAT, but to rescue citizens pinned down or threatened by gunfire or violent mobs.

The 1997 North Hollywood bank robbery in Los Angeles is a case in point. In that instance, the police felt the need to commandeer an armored Brinks truck and acquire assault rifles from a nearby gun store in order to effectively protect citizens from violent felons.

Closer to home, on my desk I keep the names of three deceased juveniles from Miami-Dade County who were victims of the McDuffie Riots. Mob-constructed roadblocks, smoke and fire, sniper fire, and other deadly projectiles such as rocks and bottles hindered the work of police and slowed emergency medical response.

It is painful to think that had local police had access to armored vehicles and other public safety equipment, those three juveniles would be alive today. In both cases, as in so many others, nobody posed an argument against police becoming militarized. The burden is on those insisting such equipment is unnecessary to suggest an alternative.

The solution is a measured response. SWAT must be disciplined, well-trained and used as a last resort. MFFs and the RDF must be deployed strategically with the intent to preserve order and save lives, in some occasions away from public view. Serious internal discussions should take place on use-of-force policies and the way in which those guidelines translate into mission objectives.

Commanders need to ask themselves tough questions. Is it worth sending a SWAT team inside a house for every narcotics search warrant? Is it the police who are causing an escalation of force? Exactly what quantity of illegal drugs justifies the long-term pain of a wrongful death or teammate killed in a search warrant? Are there alternatives? Better to have those difficult discussions before rather than after the fact.

Q: You own a large collection of books. What are you reading today, and which book would you recommend to a newly assigned SWAT officer and the SWAT commander?

A: Over the course of a year leading up to the Zimmerman trial, anticipating potential concerns in the event of an acquittal, I took an interest in the concept of “winning the hearts and minds” of a community. It was the approach advocated overseas by Gens. David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal, with their emphasis on community engagement. I began reading countless articles and books on counterinsurgency techniques, searching for similarities, ways of adapting these ideas in order to prevent or minimize youth violence. Just recently, at the suggestion of a brilliant University of Miami professor, I read a book titled “Counterinsurgency,” by Douglas Porch, in which he concluded that counterinsurgency is a flawed strategy. It is important for law enforcement personnel to understand multiple perspectives on issues such as counterinsurgency. I found McChrystal’s “My Share of the Task” a fascinating memoir on leadership and problem-solving.

For newly assigned SWAT officers, I have also handed out copies of Steven Pressfield’s “Gates of Fire,” and once made it mandatory reading during an SRT school. In a competitive atmosphere generally composed of strong personalities, it is not uncommon for cliques or divisions to occur amongst teammates. I found this book instrumental in emphasizing the value of brotherhood, teamwork and esprit de corps.

Somebody once told me, “Not all readers are leaders, but all leaders are readers.” Today, with so much media attention and public demand seeking clarity in law enforcement policies and strategy, SWAT commanders must set aside time to read and research. Get with your internal legal department and have them provide case law regarding use-of-force incidents and search warrants. There is plenty of information on the internet. Read *The Tactical Edge*; stay current on critical global incidents.

Due to our current public safety challenges across the nation, SWAT commanders may easily find themselves explaining the capabilities of their teams to senior police executives and government leadership. Developing political astuteness and understanding the dynamics of the executive levels within your agency may help to develop support and attract funding towards the team. Also, follow your chief or sheriff’s interviews via media outlets. Read the biographies of Chiefs Daryl Gates, Ray Kelly and William Bratton, to name a few.

From a leadership perspective, a fascinating read for me was David Halberstam’s “The Best and the Brightest,” detailing how President Kennedy’s brilliant cabinet members tackled the challenges of the Vietnam War. Halberstam provides vivid insights into some of the brightest minds of that generation. Yet, despite assembling a team of extraordinarily intelligent, well-educated, experienced, patriotic, capable leaders, misjudgments can occur, sometimes causing leaders to push still further into unfavorable and undesirable circumstances. That is certainly a lesson I would want a SWAT leader to remember. ■



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