



WHAT LAW ENFORCEMENT NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT CRIMINAL SNIPERS

BY DERRICK BARTLETT

The horrific events of Las Vegas have sparked discussions about the impact of a criminal sniper and how law enforcement should respond to the next one. This article, originally published by the American Sniper Association in 2000, includes some updates reflecting the lessons re-learned in Las Vegas.

On the morning of Aug. 1, 1966, Charles Whitman walked out onto the clock tower observation deck at the University of Texas with an arsenal and a plan. From his barricaded vantage point, he proceeded to shoot at targets of opportunity on the campus below. In less than 90 minutes, he would kill 12 people, and wound another 30.

Responding police resources immediately found themselves at a disadvantage. Not only did Whitman's position provide him a wide kill zone and ample ballistic protection, he also possessed weapons superior to the handguns and shotguns available

to law enforcement. Whitman's rampage wasn't ended until two Austin police officers were able to get up on the observation deck and confront him face to face.

What happened that day in Texas should have served as a wake-up call to law enforcement agencies worldwide. This incident, however, was treated as an anomaly, a once-in-a-lifetime event that couldn't possibly happen again. Whitman's use of strategy, superior firepower and positioning stymied police resources. Still, the law enforcement community has chosen to ignore the lessons of the past, rather than learn from them.

Now, more than 50 years later, agencies everywhere are still reassuring themselves by saying, "It was an isolated incident. It can't happen here." A philosopher once told us, "Those who refuse to learn from the past are doomed to repeat it." Ever since that August afternoon in Austin, criminal snipers have been carrying out similar attacks, and in most cases, police response has not changed. The result has been casualties, both civilian and police personnel.

Make no mistake, a sniper incident is not your usual call for service. If you and your agency approach it as such, the consequences will be tragic.

Nor is it the rare, isolated event you may think it is.

Administrators, tactical team leaders and supervisors, as well as the people they command, should be aware of the following points regarding criminal sniper incidents:

A criminal sniper incident is different from an active-shooter incident. An active shooter moves among his victims in a systematic attack. This is the person who shows up at a school or workplace with weapons, committing his violence at close range. A criminal sniper will be shooting from a position of concealment and/or cover, removed from his potential targets by distance. These differences alone will make the much-practiced active-shooter tactics less effective.

A criminal sniper incident can happen anywhere, anytime. History offers no statistical protection to any certain type of jurisdiction. Sniper incidents are not limited by country, state or city limits. This type of incident has victimized everything from huge metropolitan areas to rural stretches of highway. This means your town is a potential target for the sniper incident that will take place somewhere tomorrow. Thousands of sniping incidents have taken place since Whitman. Only those resulting in body counts make the news. In this age of jaded media and viewers, only large body counts make the national news programs. As a result, most of these incidents go underreported and unknown.

Criminal snipers fall into one of two broad categories: The hit-and-run sniper and the barricaded sniper. The hit-and-run sniper is the more prevalent. Every call of random shots

fired is a possible hit-and-run sniper. These individuals take up a position of concealment, fire a few shots, and then withdraw, or move to another hide. Their targets may be buildings, streetlights or passing cars. In some cases, they will attack people. As people or police begin to recognize his presence and respond to it, the hit-and-run sniper will retreat. His escape will allow him to attack again, at a time and place of his choosing. The 2002 Washington, D.C., snipers are an example of this.

The barricaded sniper is the one who makes the evening news. This sniper sets up his firing position, attacks his targets, and is still there when the police arrive. He has planned to continue his killing spree until you find a way to stop him. He represents the most dangerous threat police officers will ever face. The 2017 Las Vegas shooter is the latest example of this.

Preparation is the essential element necessary for a safe and effective response. This means developing plans ahead of time for the probability of having to deal with a sniper call, and taking the time to practice them. As the bullets are flying and the bodies are falling is the wrong time to be making up a strategy. Recognize the probability. A sniper incident is going to happen. You have no control over when or where. However, it is going to happen. It is your responsibility to be ready and equipped to handle it quickly, safely and effectively.

Potential sniper encounters should be anticipated in any of the following scenarios:

- Riot situations and events of civil unrest. Some individuals take

advantage of the chaotic circumstances surrounding riots to take pot shots at the crowds or emergency personnel on the scene. Review the after-action reports of any large civil disturbance, and you will find stories of firefighters and police officers who have come under fire from undetected snipers.

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- Dignitary and protection details. Every time your agency is tasked with providing security for a visiting dignitary, politician, celebrity or other high-profile individual, you run the risk of someone trying to kill your protectee. Remember, two of the most famous assassinations in recent American history were perpetrated in this fashion. Both Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy were killed by snipers. Abortion clinic doctors have recently been the targets for this type of attack as well.

- Ambushes. Planned attacks on police officers have become an alarming trend. Many of the most recent sniper incidents have been carefully executed ambushes of police personnel. The standard tactic is to make a bogus call to have police respond to a specific location. As the unsuspecting officers arrive on scene, they are systematically attacked. A graphic demonstration of this tactic was employed several years ago in Texas, where three officers were killed, one by one, as they arrived to handle a phony domestic dispute call.

- SWAT calls. Special operations teams are used to responding to a hostage situation, or a barricaded subject. The standard response in those circumstances is to contain and contact. The culprit is usually passive and defensive, and content to negotiate. On rare occasions, the culprits have turned offensive, actively attacking responders in their containment positions. At that point, standard SWAT logic goes out the window, and a different approach needs to be adopted.

- Large-scale public events. As we recently saw in Las Vegas, outdoor concerts and similar events are now potential targets for a criminal sniper. This represents a security nightmare. Since this scenario provides a contained, target-rich environment, I'm surprised someone hadn't taken advantage of this before.

These are not the only situations that may lead to a sniper incident. Crime is limited only by the imaginations of the people perpetrating it. Tomorrow, a new sniper may create his own initiating event.

There is a distinctive attack profile associated with the criminal sniper. First, a sniper attack is rarely a spontaneous event. The perpetrators do not simply wake up one morning, grab a rifle, and go on a shooting rampage. On the contrary, many sniper incidents are the final product of extensive planning and practice. The culprits have been known to do site visits to choose their kill zone. They have purchased weapons and ammunition in advance. Many have done extra training, specifically for their "mission." Several have written about their intentions in journals and letters, well in advance of the actual event.

Apart from a SWAT incident that evolves from a domestic call, there are usually no hostages involved. As a result, there are no demands from the shooter, and negotiations are pointless. His agenda is strictly offensive. Stopping to talk takes away from shooting time.

Usually, the shooter does not personally know his targets. They are faceless strangers, chosen at random by where they are or with

whom they associate on the day he initiates his attack. The exception to this is the deliberately chosen assassination target.

Criminal snipers attack with a plan. In looking over the hundreds of documented sniper incidents from the last two decades, a method to their madness appears.

The sniper will choose a kill zone. As pointed out earlier, many snipers pick out locations familiar to them, or they have taken the time to scout out a perspective kill zone. Charles Whitman was familiar with the campus of his university. He knew where to position himself to best take advantage of his target-rich environment. Others since have followed suit.

The sniper will use some method to draw targets into his kill zone. In Jonesboro, Arkansas, the snipers pulled a fire alarm to bring their targets out to the playground. Others have set fires or made false 911 calls. One favored tactic has been around for a hundred years. Snipers have been known to wound one person, and then lay in wait to attack anyone attempting to rescue or render aid to them.

At some point in time, the sniper decides to stay and continue to kill, or withdraw undetected. Sometimes, this decision is made on the spot. Usually, though, the sniper knew when he left home whether he was planning to come back.

HANDGUNS AND SHOTGUNS ARE NO MATCH FOR A BARRICADED SNIPER WITH A SCOPED RIFLE. BUT UPGRADED EQUIPMENT IS USELESS WITHOUT UPGRADED TRAINING TO MATCH.

At the beginning, the sniper has the upper hand. He is initiating the attack at a time and place of his choosing. He has scouted the area and knows the approaches and escape routes. He is familiar with your expected response practices and is anticipating your every move. (Anyone doubting this has only to read some of the interviews granted by surviving snipers after their surrender. They knew what they were doing, and what they expected the police to do. They could predict and counter most police tactics as they were employed.) He is operating from a position of concealment and cover. He sees responding police units long before they can see him. He is often equipped with weapons that give him ballistic superiority to anything the police may have in their holsters. The police will just be more targets of opportunity.

One of the frightening differences in Las Vegas was the use of weapons modified for high-volume fire. Since he was firing into a large crowd, slow-fire accuracy wasn't necessary. The shooter achieved his hideous level of carnage by being able to fire hundreds of rounds into a confined space in a short timeframe.

There is a tendency to underestimate the sniper. Admittedly, barricading oneself in a building and shooting at everything that moves is an act of complete madness. It is not something a rational human being is noted for doing. But don't make the strategic gaffe of thinking this person can be dealt with like the average person suffering from a mental illness. Crazy does not equal stupid. The sniper may well be better

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trained, better equipped and better prepared for this encounter than any of your responding personnel. To treat him as anything less because you doubt his mental capabilities invites disaster, because it gives him yet another tactical advantage.

With these facts in mind, what should law enforcement do to handle the next major sniper incident? They should begin with a proactive approach to the potential problem. Take the time to learn from the snipers of the past. Books and articles written about the "Who's Who" of sniping will reveal a wealth of valuable lessons. Today, we have the advantage of studying the cases of Charles Whitman, Mark James Robert Essex, James Kristian, Julian Knight, Brenda Spencer and others like them from the last 50 years.

The attack profiles and tactics of the shooters continue to be repeated; likewise, the responses and mistakes made by law enforcement. These case studies provide a textbook for all of law enforcement to study in preparation for their confrontation. Become a student of history. Knowing your history will predict your future.

Agencies must establish policies dictating responses of all involved resources. Such policies are already in place for major accidents, natural disasters and large events. A sniper incident, especially a barricade, requires the same level of involvement and coordination of responding resources. Police, fire, EMS and others may all be called in during a major sniper call. If no policy is in place today, then you will be making it up on the fly tomorrow.

One strategy now being discussed in the media is the employment of "anti-sniper teams" as a deterrent at public venues. Take a deep breath and think this through before reacting. There are logistical and tactical issues to be overcome before this can be viewed as an option. This deserves an article of its own to do it justice.

Plan for the worst-case scenarios, and train for them on a departmental level. It may be a major task to coordinate, and it will be costly and time consuming. However, training is the only safe place to try out the elements of your proposed plan and make corrections. Training is the time when mistakes can be made without sacrificing lives. Without a planned, coordinated response, which has been practiced and perfected, the lives of everyone on scene will be at unnecessary risk. Approaching an

active criminal sniper cold is inviting catastrophe.

Take special care to properly prepare your patrol personnel. In all sniper incidents, they will be among the first to make contact with the shooter. They will often be counted among the first casualties. They need to know the potential threat they will be facing, and how to respond to safely contain the shooter. They also need to be equipped with weaponry that will give them an equal chance in fighting the sniper. Handguns and shotguns are no match for a barricaded sniper with a scoped rifle. But upgraded equipment is useless without upgraded training to match.

Develop a structured operational sequence for locating, isolating and neutralizing the sniper as quickly as possible. This plan will be put into motion by the first responders, but as the incident goes on, it will have to be continued by arriving SWAT personnel. Classroom instruction, provided by qualified and knowledgeable personnel, is the best starting point for this process. Practical exercises help to fine tune the plan and reinforce the details.

A criminal sniper incident is like nothing else in police work. Safely resolving it requires planning and training. Realizing the probability of such an incident taking place in your jurisdiction, and not taking immediate action to prepare your personnel to handle it, borders on deliberate indifference. Austin, Texas, police Chief Robert Miles gave a news conference shortly after the Texas Tower shootings. He sounded almost prophetic when he said, "This could have happened in any city in America, or

in the world for that matter." For the last 50 years, he has been right. The question you must ask yourself and your agency is, "Are you ready for the next Charles Whitman?"



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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