

NTOA COMMAND COLLEGE STUDENT PROFILE



COMMANDER JON THOMPSON
KENT (WA) POLICE DEPARTMENT, PATROL/VALLEY SWAT

Commander Jon Thompson has been in law enforcement for over 30 years, starting his career with the Orange County (CA) Sheriff's Department in 1988. He moved to the Vancouver (WA) Police Department in 1999 and then to the Kent (WA) Police Department in 2011. He also serves as a commander on the Valley SWAT regional team.

Q: How do you envision the NTOA Command College benefiting you in your leadership role on your team?

A: I think the classes I have completed so far have given me a deeper understanding of the command aspect of tactical operations, as opposed to the operational level. I spent about 11 years as a team member, then spent time away from SWAT when I went to another agency. My return to SWAT was as a team commander instead of in an operational role, and the differences and changes, were extreme, to say the least. I don't think that many agencies truly prepare their current and future leaders for their roles, but that is where this program comes into play.

Q: You have had an opportunity to serve in both the military and civilian law enforcement and work for a variety of leaders. What consistent traits do you see in good leaders?

A: The good leaders are consistently humble and accepting of feedback, and are always willing to learn from others. A natural curiosity is necessary as well, as part of that willingness to learn also means actually seeking out the subject matter experts on your team or in your area to learn more from them. My operational background was as a sniper, with some entry training. Therefore, I'm constantly asking questions of my team leaders in regards to less lethal, chemical munitions and the like. I think the initial reaction from the team members was surprise but now they're used to my questions.

Flexibility is another necessary quality, given the constantly changing environment of our profession, whether the change is a new tactic or a recent court decision. I often tell my officers that there is a thin line between the "right" course of action and the "correct" course of action, and we as law enforcement professionals have to be able to tell the difference and be willing to change course if need be.

Q: How have the lessons in the Command College improved your interaction with other tactical teams and leaders in your area?

A: These courses have caused me to seriously contemplate how and why I may cooperate with other agencies and their leaders. Over the last year, we've spent a lot of time networking with other team commanders in the region, mainly just to get to know each other and what our respective team's capabilities might be.

I'm not sure I would have recognized the need to do this if it weren't for my enrollment in the Command College. Those relationships have paid off quite well in recent months, especially when dealing with civil unrest and potential officer deployments in a larger city just north of my jurisdiction. Because I already had a relationship with the commander of that city's team, I was able to gain more insight into his response to the unrest, as well as political considerations he was dealing with. These insights were passed on to other team commanders who hadn't yet dealt with the same level of unrest.

Q: As a senior leader within your organization, what role do you feel you play in identifying and mentoring the next generation of leaders?

A: Besides my role on SWAT, I'm also one of the senior commanders for our patrol division. We have a core group of outstanding leaders at the officer level, both formal and informal, and throughout my career I have been involved in training newer officers, whether as an FTO or informally in a SWAT role. These officers may be an FTO, a senior member of the tactical team or simply a respected senior officer who is squared away. Identifying and mentoring those officers is a passion of mine so that our agency and our team can continue to not only grow but flourish. My SWAT officers have seen that they can quickly become de facto leaders, especially on critical incidents while working patrol, and I feel extremely comfortable in allowing a great deal of latitude for their decision-making as they know that they have my trust and confidence.

Q: What feedback would you give other chiefs who may be considering the Command College program for either themselves or members of their leadership team?

A: I would absolutely encourage any current and potential future SWAT leader to enroll in these courses. My past experience had included numerous tactical and leadership-based courses, but I am still learning through the Command College. One prime example is the timing and relevant material of many of these classes.

I initially went through what was then "Command and Decision-Making" back in 2008. Since that time, NTOA has added so much new and additional material that this class has been split into Command 1 and Command 2 as separate courses of instruction. Going through each of these updated courses added quite a bit to my knowledge base. For any chiefs who are considering sending their team leaders or commanders, I think the potential return on the training is well worth the initial investment of sending someone to the college.

Q: Operating in a strong multi-jurisdictional response system, you must constantly have to collaborate with other peers to accomplish your goals. What advice would you give aspiring leaders learning to operate in this environment?

A: I am currently the lead commander of a regional team with seven agencies contributing funds and personnel. While each agency does also have a command representative,

I'm the face that our chiefs see each month at their board meeting. I've learned that establishing personal relationships with each of them is key, as I have to know what questions each chief may have or what fears his particular community may have about a SWAT deployment. One chief may have concerns about budget and training costs, while that isn't important to another chief who does care about citizen perception. I've learned to mitigate any fears by anticipating potential questions.

Also, we as police leaders in general but SWAT leaders in particular have to be ambassadors in the community at large for what we and our officers do. I made it a goal to bring a local news crew out to an active shooter class hosted by our team for local patrol officers. It started good conversations with that reporter; our community members, who saw the active steps we were taking to train officers; and the local elected officials, who were impressed with the positive feedback from all levels.

Finally, I've learned not to take things personally, as many of those who attack our methods and processes simply don't know any better and need to be educated themselves.

Q: As part of the Command College program, you are asked to select a Capstone Research Project. What topic will you select and why?

A: In Module 1, I did my Capstone on professional development of tactical leaders. While tactical skills are important, most agencies do a poor job of developing leaders at all and often seem frightened at the prospect of SWAT members in any leadership role. Fortunately, my agency recognizes that SWAT officers are leaders due to their mindset and assertiveness. My team does a great job of assigning newer team members to experienced SWAT officers, with the two-fold goal of mentoring the new officer and giving the experienced officer a taste of leadership as well as a teaching role. We recognize that there are certain benchmarks that each new team member must achieve before coming off probation.

My Module 2 Capstone was an examination of the 1972 Munich Olympic Games and the disastrous response of the German police to the kidnapping of 11 Israeli athletes. I looked at how a different mindset and deployment of proper SWAT tactics could have made a difference in effecting a successful rescue of the victims.

For the final module, I am considering doing a close-examination of a hostage rescue incident my team was involved in, with lessons learned. In conversations with SWAT leaders in my area, I've found that the best learning often comes with a look at the examples of others' mistakes and successes.

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