



NTOA SWAT STANDARD USER'S MANUAL

PART 1 OF 4

By Ed Allen

This four-part series will offer guidance to commanders, team leaders and tactical trainers to better understand and implement the philosophies of the NTOA SWAT Standard.

In September 2011, members of the NTOA Standard Review Committee developed and published the NTOA SWAT Standard. The document established a basic standard for the association's member agencies and serves as an efficient core set of concepts and principles that improve standardization within the tactical law enforcement profession.

During the last two years, NTOA's instructional cadre has made every effort to incorporate discussions about the standard into their courses. This four-part series will echo those discussions in an attempt to highlight what commanders and other team members should consider when implementing the standard into their operations. We will break down the standard by section and offer suggestions and advice from a variety of contributors.

SECTION 1.0 — SCOPE OF STANDARD

Two of the most popular courses offered by NTOA are SWAT Command Decision-Making and Leadership and Team Leader Development — a telling sign that the professionals involved in tactical law enforcement leadership are hungry for information and advice from their peers. It should also be no surprise that as the U.S. labor market experiences the largest generational retirement shift ever, so does the law enforcement profession.

The courses previously mentioned are consistently filled with new team leaders and commanders who are taking on roles left vacant as a result of baby boomer retirements. This all-too-common scenario has left many new tactical law enforcement leaders asking the same questions: *What should my team be doing in terms of training? What policies do I need to have in place to reduce liability and ensure consistency? What should my operational capabilities be? How does my team stack up to other teams?* All are valid questions, and although sometimes the standard provides answers, often it does not. In those situations, though, it at least provides the questions you should be asking so you can develop the appropriate answer. Not only is it the SWAT commander's role to ensure proper operational readiness, but to place the team and agency in the most legally and civilly defensible position possible.

It should be noted that throughout the standard and this series of articles, the term “voluntary compliance” is employed. We have not, nor will we ever, mandate compliance with the standard. We merely offer the document and these articles as guidance for those teams who seek to reach a higher level of professionalism.

Section 1.1

The scope of this standard includes concepts and principles that relate to the organization, training, operational tactics, personnel management and equipment of a SWAT team. The standard will not dictate how member agencies will write and apply any specific policies as it relates to SWAT team operations, but rather provide guidance based upon the terminology and collective viewpoint of the NTOA organization.

SECTION 2.0 — DEFINITION OF SWAT

In this section, the committee attempted to capture both the historical and contemporary definition of a SWAT team. Many established teams defined themselves decades ago, yet many agencies find themselves developing brand new teams today. For a variety of reasons, some agency administrators elect not to refer to their tactical teams as SWAT, opting for other designations such as Emergency Services Unit (ESU), Emergency Response Unit (ERU), etc. Regardless of your team's history or moniker, if you fulfill a tactical response role meeting this definition, you are what the NTOA refers to as a SWAT team.

Within Section 2.0, the committee devoted equal attention to what is *not* a SWAT team. At no point does the Standard discourage agencies from having other specialized units that perform such tasks as fugitive apprehension, drug investigations or event security. But just because there are tactical aspects to those functions, as well as similarities in equipment and procedures, that does not make them interchangeable with a fully functioning SWAT team.

Agencies should be careful to define the mission, capabilities and limitations of any specialized unit. In years past, it was easy to identify SWAT operators on a critical incident scene. They were the officers with entry vests, shields, shoulder-fired weapons (other than a shotgun) and possibly several less-lethal devices. Today, that description could be appropriate for certain investigators or even patrol officers at some agencies. Generally speaking, we believe that is a good thing. As an organization, we represent the tactical law enforcement community as a whole, regardless of what type of team you are on, or not on for that matter. However, we also recognize that merely having the equipment does not

Section 2.1

A Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team is a designated law enforcement team whose members are recruited, selected, trained, equipped and assigned to resolve critical incidents involving a threat to public safety which would otherwise exceed the capabilities of traditional law enforcement first responders and/or investigative units.



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define you as a SWAT team. Most seasoned tactical commanders can share stories of how a fugitive arrest warrant or a drug search warrant turned in a matter of seconds into a barricaded subject or even a hostage situation. The resources required to resolve that type of incident typically far surpass the capability of most patrol or investigative units.

It is incumbent upon the SWAT team commander to facilitate frank discussions with other patrol and investigative unit commanders within the agency regarding what the mission, capabilities and limitations are for each. Those discussions should not be adversarial, but rather collaborative.

Education of commanders and line-level personnel should take place well before an incident occurs in order to ensure there are no surprises as to which unit will fill what role on the day of the incident. Your agency should have current threat and vulnerability assessments to use as a primer for this discussion. Run through scenarios that occur most often and scenarios that are most likely to occur, and define each unit's expected tasks in response to those scenarios. Identify the tasks that could be shared by multiple units, as well as those that should only be handled by the SWAT team. Role definition applies to units as well as personnel, and all should be well-versed on that role prior to a critical incident. Once consensus is reached, the agency should codify that agree-



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ment in its written directives so that every agency member understands his or her role in a critical incident.

This section of the standard also provides a bulleted list of tasks that support units or agencies without a SWAT team can conduct until the team arrives. Those tasks are broken down into two major categories: establishing a tactical command and establishing an effective perimeter. Although these are not typically SWAT functions, they often will become the team's first tasks if not completed already by on-scene personnel, thus slowing down the tactical response phase of the operation. SWAT team commanders should recognize, though, that it is their responsibility to ensure those non-SWAT personnel are properly trained and equipped to conduct the tasks expected of them. SWAT team members should be tasked with conducting short-shift briefings and in-service training sessions that better prepare first responders for their role during the initial stages of an incident.

Section 2 also recognizes that SWAT teams vary greatly



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in their configuration and scheduling. Depending upon the agency, it can be a full-time or collateral duty assignment. There are very few jurisdictions in this country that have crime rates and workloads high enough to justify a full-time team. The majority of NTOA member teams are in a collateral duty assignment.

We have also witnessed a growing increase in multijurisdictional and regional teams throughout the U.S. Multijurisdictional teams typically comprise officers from two or more agencies that share resources and jurisdictional authority (as with a city within a county). Regional teams typically form when two existing teams from contiguous jurisdictions join to share resources and increase capabilities and response area coverage. We will address those topics in more depth in our last article in this series. For our purposes here, though, all of them are considered SWAT teams by the Standard's definition.

SECTION 3.0 — SWAT TEAM PURPOSE

At the risk of sounding philosophical, *what* we are (definition) and *why* we exist (purpose) are two different topics. If you are the commander of your team, you should be having those philosophical discussions with your chain of command and, most importantly, with the head of your agency. Hopefully, the result of that conversation will look something like the purpose we have provided in this section.

We exist to save lives: our own and other officers' lives, the lives of those being victimized, innocent bystanders and yes, even the offender. We bring to the table specialized training and equipment, as well as a focused effort to reduce the loss of life and safely resolve critical incidents. Your agency head, chain of command and every team member should fully understand the *priority of life* concept and commit themselves to it in their decision-making process throughout an incident. The priority of life concept enables quick, concise and appropriate tactical decisions to be made by SWAT commanders, no matter what the circumstances. (For further explanation of the priority of life concept, refer to Sid Heal's article, "Priority of Life" in *The Tactical Edge*, Spring 2012, p. 84.)

Section 3.1

The primary purpose of SWAT is to provide a systematic approach to saving lives in accordance with the priorities of life and the specific standards set forth herein, in concert with the totality of circumstances presented.

The next article in this series will focus on Section 4.0 — SWAT Team Configuration and Capabilities. //

The author acknowledges Capt. Don Kester for his invaluable contributions to this article.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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COMMANDER'S NOTES

- Read the NTOA SWAT Standard again
- Schedule a meeting with patrol and investigation commanders to discuss roles during an incident
- Assign team leaders to conduct shift briefings
- Have a conversation with the Chief/Sheriff about their vision of SWAT's purpose
- Share Sid Heal's article on the "priority of life" concept with everyone