

INTERVIEW WITH NTOA'S NEW DIRECTOR OF TRAINING AND EDUCATION DON KESTER



In February 2015, Don Kester was selected as the NTOA's new Director of Training and Education. He replaces Rob Cartner, who served our organization honorably for 15 years. Don is looking forward to meeting all of you at an NTOA event or your state association conference, but in the interim, we thought we would ask him some of the questions that many of you may already have for him.

Q: You've spent almost 24 years with the Pima County (AZ) Sheriff's Department and more than 15 years as an NTOA board member, section chair and lead instructor. How do you feel that experience has prepared you for your new role?

A: I have been involved with SWAT since 1993 and during that time I have been blessed to have received some of the best training available from many sources, and to have worked closely with many of the most progressive and critical-thinking law enforcement minds and trainers in the country. The key reason that I am in this position is because of the guidance and mentorship provided to me over the last 20-plus years by many professionals, and for that I am very grateful.

I have been exposed to countless tactical scenarios, while performing over 1,000 high-risk missions of all types to include barricades, hostage rescues and active shooter/mass casualty incidents. I have served almost every role possible on a SWAT team, from operator (entry, sniper, breacher, shield, grenadier) to team leader, team supervisor, team commander and above. I have served on a large, single agency team with both full- and part-time elements, as well as a multi-agency regional team. My SWAT experience and exposure provides an insight that allows me to relate to most any team or situation, and that is something I always keep in mind whether I am instructing, conducting a team review, or assisting a team or individuals in working through a problem.

With regard to the NTOA, I have been involved with the association since the late 1990s and served in variety of roles. That historical insight and internal experience has allowed me to build an incredible knowledge base about the NTOA and the factors that are involved in operating such a critical training and information

exchange organization. I have learned much about what works and what does not, and I know that the NTOA must remain progressive and continue to provide leadership in a variety of issues. I have been and remain a student of SWAT and high-risk operations. I understand what today's law enforcement officers desire and need in terms of training, education and leadership. There is much to accomplish in those and other areas, and my goal is to ensure that the NTOA is at the forefront in leading a collaborative effort with other organizations to enhance the performance capabilities and professionalism of law enforcement.

Q: What do you think are the most pressing training challenges for agencies in the next decade?

A: We have seen some watershed events over the last few years that have altered the future of law enforcement. Truly preparing and being capable of effectively handling emerging threats is a real challenge for law enforcement agencies today. Both the technical and practical skill sets that evolved can be overwhelming to law enforcement, and we must find ways to make that training more efficient and ongoing, while making it available with today's rapidly diminishing budgets.

Terrorism preparedness and response has gradually become less of a priority in recent years; however, with the recent resurgence of activity globally, I believe it is time for us to reemphasize the importance of such training. As such incidents occur here domestically, it will be imperative that law enforcement special operations personnel know how to respond to and manage the incident appropriately.

Certainly the issue of crowd control and civil disturbance is probably going to become a more common mission of law

enforcement. Some of the old methods may not be as acceptable today as they once were, but constant education and tactical development will be crucial to achieve a successful outcome and positive public perception.

Leadership development at every level of an agency must become a mandate rather than an option. We can do more to educate and enhance the emotional and social intelligence (ESI) of our line-level personnel (and all other ranks) from the beginning. Many of our current challenges could be significantly diminished if law enforcement leaders viewed this topic with the importance that it deserves.

Technology has become significant in our profession, and appropriately utilizing it while balancing many other interests will be a challenge. This is rapidly becoming a specialty within agencies, and implementing technology as a training resource as well as a tool to resolve critical incidents provides a unique set of challenges that we must sort through.

Today's learner is ready and eager to perform, but as teachers we must adapt our methods to become more effective. Long distance learning and the use of technology as a learning tool is a must, and we must leverage it to our advantage to provide more quality training to more of our members.

Law enforcement is being scrutinized like never before, and society is modifying its expectations of law enforcement, right or wrong. As a result, our education must also include media and the public to an extent never before seen, particularly with SWAT. The more effective the training that can be provided, the more positively law enforcement will be viewed. We must be aggressive and not settle for what is sometimes the accepted norm.

Q: What is your broader vision of how training will be provided to the membership of the NTOA in the future?

A: Our organization has had tremendous success over the years providing onsite training, and that will certainly continue to be a major focus. I would anticipate some newer courses that reach out to a broader spectrum of law enforcement and criminal justice employees. The NTOA conferences have always been hugely successful, but we must continue to advance with our membership and provide new offerings each year.

Various methods of instruction will be explored, but all need to be interactive and adult-learning based. Feedback-driven training is critical to the future success of any training entity. Online and distance learning will be enhanced for some disciplines. While it may not be appropriate for all topics, there is certainly a wealth of information that can be provided to our membership in quick, efficient, cost-effective methods. By offering course materials, prerequisite and post-course testing online, for some classes, we can potentially minimize the classroom lecture time and subsequently increase that practical training time.

I intend to focus on regional-driven training concepts as well. This may allow for additional and more affordable training in some areas of the country while also allowing for a broader array of topics in those geographical areas.

Q: With more than 75 instructors in the NTOA cadre and 18 section chairs, how will you facilitate communication among them to ensure consistency?

A: This is one area that technology can be utilized to organize the flow of information and facilitate discussion. I plan on taking full advantage of resources such as webinars, teleconferencing and instructor development workshops to accomplish this.

We may also have online discussion capabilities for the chairs and instructors. But this will be one of my priorities: to ensure free flow of information, solicit ideas and feedback and ensure consistency.

Q: How do you anticipate identifying the training needs of our members and responding to them?

A: First and foremost, we need to listen. We need to solicit feedback through a variety of channels from our membership, instructors, section chairs, staff, state associations and more. And then we need to sort through that information and act on it. The greatest training ideas will not come from me. It is my job to facilitate the successful implementation of those ideas.

I expect the instructors and staff to actively seek feedback and then act on it. There will be a formal process in place to allow that to happen. There will also be a location on the NTOA website to allow for feedback and ideas related to training. Instructor critiques will be modified and the method of collection will also likely change. This provides a great opportunity for feedback from both members and non-members. Anyone representing the NTOA needs to constantly be seeking input and feedback. The state associations are a great resource in so many ways, to include idea generation and support. I would like to have representatives at the vast majority of these events.

Q: What's your best advice for those members interested in becoming an NTOA instructor?

A: Gain a great reputation locally, and then branch out regionally and across the state if possible. Become an expert in the field and remain a student of the profession. Never stop studying, attending classes and learning. We look for a combination of experience as well as instructor capability. Be open to other ideas even if your team

may not utilize that tactic. It is not the goal of the NTOA to teach one way of doing things, but to evaluate and disseminate options depending on the situation. I always encourage instructors to attend NTOA classes and conferences as well as those of other organizations and associations.

Continue to focus on the basics of instructing as well as with tactics, and then build upon that. Networking and working with other established instructors is a great way to be introduced to new ideas and gain exposure. There is a process for becoming an NTOA instructor, but I imagine that will become a bit more formalized in the near future and is certainly something that I am already evaluating.

Perhaps the most effective and meaningful key to becoming an established instructor is to find respected and progressive mentors who are willing to guide and assist. I had many over my career and that was a key to success. It is difficult to achieve what we want alone, especially in this team-oriented industry that we live and breathe. ■

Don wants to hear your questions, training suggestions and any recommendations or requests you may have. He can be reached at Don.Kester@NTOA.org.

This interview with the NTOA's new Director of Training and Education is the first in a new series called "The Interview." Consulting Editor Ed Allen will interview notable individuals in the law enforcement community, as well as NTOA section chairs, instructors, directors, members or industry leaders, in future issues of *The Tactical Edge*.