

THE INTERVIEW:

CMDR. THOR EELLS (RET.), COLORADO SPRINGS (CO) POLICE DEPARTMENT



Cmdr. Thor Eells served more than 30 years with the Colorado Springs (CO) Police Department. His assignments with the department included operator, team commander and division commander. As commander of the Specialized Enforcement Division, he was responsible for

highly specialized units such as SWAT, K9, EOD, traffic enforcement, special events and air support. He is a graduate of the FBI National Academy and Center for Creative Leadership.

Eells has taught extensively for the NTOA and is one of the core instructors of the SWAT Command and Leadership courses.

He has represented the NTOA in the Department of Homeland Security's efforts to develop SWAT capabilities and typing, and helped develop the National SWAT Standard. Eells is a recipient of the NTOA's prestigious John Kolman Award of Excellence and has been awarded his department's Distinguished Service Medal. He has served on the NTOA Board of Directors for seven years and was board chairman for two years. After retiring from Colorado Springs Police Department in June 2017, he assumed the role of executive director for the NTOA.

Q: WITH YOUR EXPERIENCE IN COMMAND LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN A VARIETY OF INCIDENT TYPES, WHAT ARE SOME OF THE COMMON LEADERSHIP SKILLS THAT YOU THINK ARE NECESSARY FOR COMMANDERS?

A: I think good leaders have to demonstrate a constant desire to learn the profession. They should be open to new ideas, express a willingness to learn and recognize that you don't know it all. It's incumbent on all good leaders, regardless of tenure, that they ensure they are as competent and prepared for the position they hold as possible.

I encourage leaders in my command to "fail forward," meaning they should identify problems, research solutions and implement actions. Even if those actions fail, there are lessons to be learned. Leaders have to possess the courage to make decisions without the fear of failure.

Good leaders have to be decisive. Rarely as leaders, and more so with tactical leaders, do we have all the information at the precise moment we need it to make decisions. Good leaders make the right decisions at the right time, with the best information available to them at that moment.

Above all else, I think it is necessary that leaders are passionate about the law enforcement profession and the idea that they serve and protect their communities.

Q: WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO BE PART OF THE NTOA AND ULTIMATELY THE ASSOCIATION'S BOARD OF DIRECTORS?

A: As a young SWAT officer, I always recognized the NTOA as the standard-bearer of excellence in the tactical community. I read *The Tactical Edge* regularly and was always impressed by the professionalism of the articles and authors. I attended as many NTOA conferences and classes as I could. I had the opportunity to meet instructors like Ron McCarthy who would become role models. Their passion and excitement for the profession caused me to seek out more ways to get involved in the efforts of the NTOA. Eventually I was given an opportunity to teach for the organization and felt an obligation to take the next step in giving back to others, similar to the mentorship that was given to me.

Q: YOU SPEAK EXTENSIVELY ABOUT LAW ENFORCEMENT'S ROLE IN RESPONDING TO BARRICADED MENTALLY ILL SUBJECT INCIDENTS. WHAT CHANGES HAVE YOU SEEN IN RESPONSE PROTOCOLS?

A: Unless you've been asleep at the wheel, we now know that dealing with the mentally ill is front and center in the public and the media's attention. It has generated a lot of internal reflection within our profession and even caused many of us to ask, "Are we always the right answer for this problem?" If we are honest with ourselves, we realize that our expectations and our legal obligations are often different. Dealing with the mentally ill is actually a civil function and not necessarily a tactical law enforcement response. In certain situations it might be the right answer, but not always.

Q: HOW DOES THIS NEW APPROACH TO MENTAL ILLNESS RESPONSE AFFECT OPERATIONS?

A: We've seen a significant rise in crisis intervention training for dispatch, patrol officers and negotiators, often resulting in the de-escalation of situations that would have historically just been referred to a tactical unit. Most progressive law enforcement agencies recognize the need to form multi-disciplinary teams of law enforcement, social workers and mental health professionals to collaboratively work on early detection, documentation and crisis avoidance, so situations never rise to the level that a tactical team is required.

If incidents do rise to the level that they are beyond the capabilities of patrol or investigative functions and a tactical team is utilized, we have operators who are far more educated on the issues surrounding mental health and resolution options.

I think law enforcement leaders today have a better appreciation for the liability that comes with dealing with mental health issues. That liability is not merely a financial one, but also includes the risk they place their officers in and their reputation with the community they serve.

Q: AS THE NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE NTOA, WHAT VISION DO YOU HAVE FOR THE ASSOCIATION IN THE FUTURE?

A: I want to continue to solidify the reputation of the NTOA as being the standard-bearer for excellence and professionalism in the tactical arena. Through collaboration with state tactical associations, other national professional associations and our federal partners, I want to see our organization continue to raise the bar. I want to ensure we are meeting the needs of our members, recognizing that we have to work diligently to ensure we are truly professional in everything we do.

I would like to see us to maintain high standards that hold us accountable, like the NTOA Tactical Response and Operations Standard and the NTOA-IACP National SWAT Study. I want our organization to provide the best training and information-sharing avenues possible through efforts like the NTOA Command College. ■