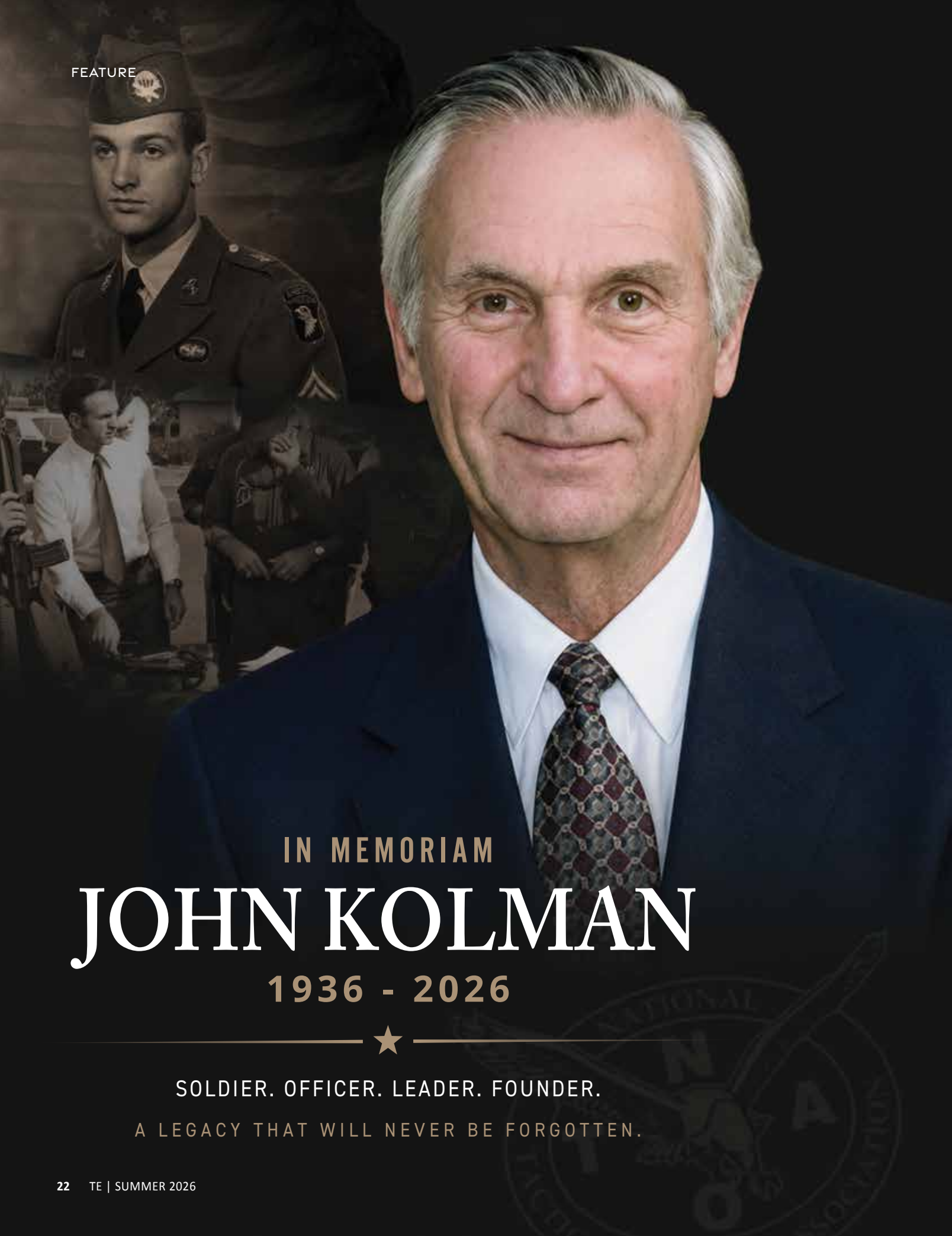


FEATURE



IN MEMORIAM

JOHN KOLMAN

1936 - 2026



SOLDIER. OFFICER. LEADER. FOUNDER.

A LEGACY THAT WILL NEVER BE FORGOTTEN.

The END *of an* ERA

REFLECTIONS ON THE PASSING OF JOHN A. KOLMAN

BY PHIL HANSEN

“
JOHN WAS
MUCH MORE
THAN A SWAT
PIONEER.
HE WAS
A TEACHER,
A VISIONARY,
A COLLABORATOR
AND A
HISTORIAN.
”

There are times when each of us suffers the loss of someone who has had a tremendous personal impact on our lives. The advancing age and full life of that loved one may help to dull the impact of our loss, but we still feel that a piece of our heart has been taken from us, leaving a hole that will never completely be filled. Those of us who were fortunate enough to know our association's founder, John A. Kolman, have felt this since his passing on March 6, 2026.

“The end of an era” is no exaggeration. John Kolman defined an era in the development of SWAT. John was much more than a SWAT pioneer. He was a teacher, a visionary, a collaborator and a historian. His integrity and strength of character are legendary, and he was not only the NTOA's founder but also the association's North Star in establishing its organizational culture of excellence. John also was the consummate gentleman and an example of graciousness to others in every respect. He exemplified the type of selfless leadership we seldom see today, but so desperately crave. John's impact was generational. If you are reading this article as a tactical law enforcement professional, chances are John Kolman had a significant impact on your training and culture.

A brief glimpse at an extraordinary career

There are far too many facets of John's career to recount in this article, but a glimpse into his background provides some context concerning his professional development and achievement. John joined the U.S. Army out of high school, serving as a soldier and NCO in the 101st Airborne Division. After completing his enlistment, he joined the Whittier (CA) Police Department, graduating as the first outside-agency Honor Cadet from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Academy. In 1963, John transferred to the Sheriff's Department (LASD) and eventually earned an assignment to the Special Enforcement Bureau (SEB) in the earliest days of what we now know of as the SWAT concept.

In those first formative years of law enforcement tactical team operations, John set the standard for collaboration. He made his own, unannounced visit to LAPD to propose that LAPD SWAT and LASD SEB begin training together. During that visit, John met LAPD's Ron McCarthy and Mike Hillmann, two men who would become legendary SWAT figures within their own right. In the ensuing years, the three established lifelong friendships, and importantly, they established a culture of camaraderie and mutual

support between LASD SEB and LAPD SWAT that set an example for other teams to emulate and still flourishes to this day.

In 1969, during his tenure as an SEB sergeant, John authored the operations plan for and led a large-scale mission at Spahn Ranch, resulting in the arrest of Charles Manson and several Manson Family cult members. Manson was later re-arrested, tried and convicted for the notorious Tate / LaBianca murders. As a lieutenant and SEB team commander, John served as chairman of the Inter-Agency Security Subcommittee for the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. This was a watershed period in the development of SWAT, as teams from LAPD, LASD, FBI and 1st Special Operations Detachment-Delta (aka Delta Force) trained together intensively for hostage rescue missions in the post-Munich Olympic massacre years. John's personal strength and charisma were crucial to the effective coordination and collaboration between those elite teams.

Throughout his military service and law enforcement career, John developed a passion for law enforcement tactical operations. He was convinced of the value and life-saving qualities of SWAT, and in 1982, John authored and published the very first textbook on SWAT, "A Guide to the Development of Special Weapons Teams." He would go on to write additional books and articles on SWAT command, as well as two beautifully crafted volumes titled "Rulers of the Night," a detailed, 50-year history of LASD SEB from 1958 through 2008.

John believed that the growing utilization of tactical units in our country created the need for a source of training and information exchange between teams. Lessons learned were valuable and often far too costly in terms of life and property to not be shared throughout our discipline. Accordingly, (long before the existence of email), John and his wife, Janice, hand-typed and mailed over 400 survey letters to law enforcement agencies across the country, asking if they perceived a need for and would support some sort of organization that would facilitate tactical training and information exchange. The response to John's survey was overwhelmingly positive, so in 1983, he founded the

National Tactical Officers Association. Together, John and Janice began publishing what is now the industry's flagship publication, *The Tactical Edge*. John, Mike Hillmann and Ron McCarthy were among the magazine's first authors, with Janice serving as the publication's editor.

John retired from the LASD at the rank of captain. He was a beloved leader at SEB who set the standard not just for operational excellence, but for establishing a culture of giving back to the profession. It was John Kolman who encouraged Sid Heal to write his first published article for *The Tactical Edge*. Sid went on to write over 160 articles and three books that are now considered essential reading in our profession. To this day, SEB personnel are still renowned for their willingness to assist other agencies and for candidly sharing lessons from their successes and failures.

John may have left the Sheriff's Department, but his contributions to tactical law enforcement remained immense. While John and Janice continued to manage the rapidly growing NTOA, John also served extensively as an expert evaluator and trainer. Following the Branch Davidian shootout with the ATF and FBI in Waco, Texas, John was asked by the U.S. Department of the Treasury to participate in an investigation and review of the incident. As a result, John testified twice before Congress regarding his findings. John was then tapped by another government agency in 1998 to assess and develop training for police agencies in the war-torn nations of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Finally, in 2005, as part of the California POST SWAT Subcommittee, John was instrumental in developing our nation's first state-sponsored SWAT Guidelines, which were then followed in 2008 by the NTOA's first release of SWAT Standards for Law Enforcement Agencies, now known as the NTOA's Tactical Response and Operations Standard (TROS).

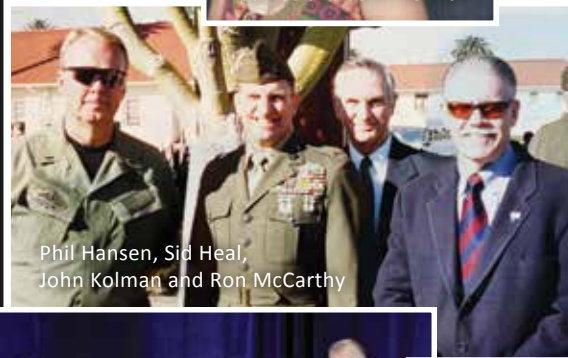
A life to emulate

As anyone can see, John Kolman continues to have a generational impact on law enforcement tactical operations. Nevertheless, in many respects, his greatest influence was based on the example he set for others as a man of character and principle.

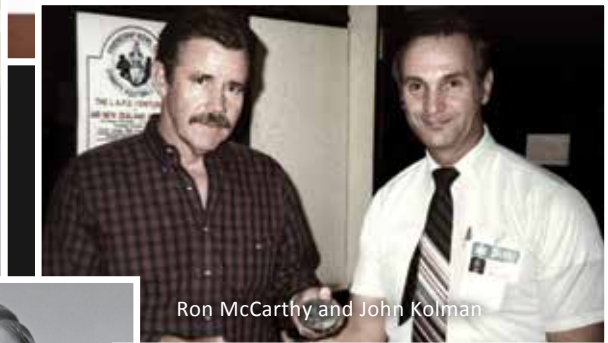
“ OVER THE YEARS AND LONG AFTER HIS DEPARTURE, MANY DECISIONS BY THE NTOA BOARD OF DIRECTORS HAVE COME DOWN TO ONE SIMPLE TEST: WHAT WOULD JOHN KOLMAN THINK OF THIS? THAT TEST HAS ALWAYS SERVED US WELL. ”



Janice and John Kolman



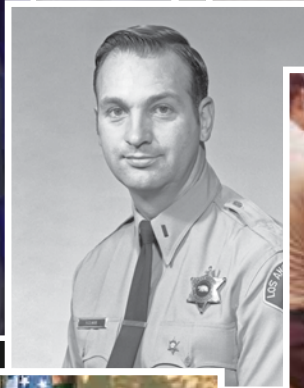
Phil Hansen, Sid Heal,
John Kolman and Ron McCarthy



Ron McCarthy and John Kolman



Kolman family accepting
2024 Hall of Honor award.



Ron McCarthy, Mike Hillman and John Kolman



One of John's *greatest gifts* was that he didn't just build teams,
he built people, and relationships that last a *lifetime*.

When I first met John Kolman, we were serving together on a California POST training committee. John had just retired from the LASD, already achieving legendary status on a nationwide basis as a SWAT leader and innovator. There's an old adage about first impressions that says, "People may not always remember what you said to them, but they'll always remember how you made them feel." I clearly remember how John made me feel when we first met. I was struck by the grace and level of respect he extended to me as a young SEB team leader. Here was this legendary figure treating me as a peer and with great kindness, as though we had both served together for years. I guess you could say that this was the first of many life lessons I learned from John over the next 40 years. He set the standard for how to treat others with dignity.

Sometime later, John asked me if I would be interested in instructing at an upcoming NTOA conference. Of course, I said yes and was thrilled beyond belief! That conference in 1988 was a life-changing experience for me. In many ways, it altered the course of my future. It was also the beginning of my nearly 40-year association with the NTOA as an instructor, director and now as a director emeritus. As I became more involved in the association, I had the opportunity to watch John and learn from the example he set for the rest of us. Over the years and long after his departure, many decisions by the NTOA Board of Directors have come down to one simple test: What would John Kolman think of this? That test has always served us well.

John was never one to overlook the importance of small gestures and expressions of appreciation to others. One example of this is how he always called our editor, Mary Heins, whenever a new edition of *The Tactical Edge* was released. Long after he retired from any official involvement in the association, John would call just to thank Mary and other members of the staff for a job well done. She has told me several times how much those calls meant to her. Throughout the years, I also received a number of thoughtful handwritten notes from John, always in his impeccable printing, encourag-

“
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ing me or commemorating some milestone in my career. I will keep and treasure those mementos for as long as I live.

You'll note that I tend to speak of John with reverence, almost as though I'm speaking of a parent. I think that it's appropriate that I do so because of John's influence on who I have become. I like to believe that I'm a better man and a better leader today than I was 40 years ago. If that's true, it's because I had a friend and mentor like John Kolman.

The true and lasting impact of a great leader is on the people they lead. John practiced and taught devotion, courage and commitment to things greater than oneself, like God, country, profession, and the sanctity of his marriage to Janice, which lasted over 62 years. These are values and characteristics that true leaders pass on from generation to generation. Young people who will never know John will be beneficiaries of his character and leadership. Being with John Kolman made you want to be a better

person and to pass life's lessons on to others.

On April 26, a beautiful celebration of life was held for John, not far from the home where he and Janice lived and raised a family for over 60 years. More than 200 friends and family came to pay their respects to a man they loved. The attendees included several current uniformed members of LASD SEB and LAPD SWAT. Their presence was a visual representation of John's lasting effect on professionalism and collaboration. Speaking of his old friend during remarks as the event's emcee, Mike Hillmann said: "One of John's greatest gifts was that he didn't just build teams, he built people, and relationships that last a lifetime."

Thank you, John, for all you did to make us better people and better tactical officers. Godspeed to you, sir. We'll look forward to your broad smile and warm handshake when we meet again in a better place.

Phil Hansen is Director Emeritus of the NTOA. For more on John Kolman's exemplary career and contributions, please visit the Hall of Honor page on NTOA's website.



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HONORING THE LEGACY OF JOHN A. KOLMAN



To honor the legacy of NTOA founder John Kolman, his family has commissioned a limited-edition commemorative challenge coin in his memory.

Proceeds from each coin sold will support the John Kolman Training Scholarship Fund, which provides financial assistance to NTOA members from small and rural agencies who may not otherwise be able to attend NTOA conferences or training courses.

QUANTITIES ARE LIMITED.

TO PLACE AN ORDER VISIT:
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