WHAT REGIONAL STRATEGIES WILL BE USED BY LAW ENFORCEMENT FOR HANDLING SWAT SITUATIONS IN VENTURA COUNTY BY THE YEAR 2005?

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This Command College Independent Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue in law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future, but rather to project a number of possible scenarios for strategic planning consideration.

Defining the future differs from analyzing the past because the future has not yet happened. In this project, useful alternatives have been formulated systematically so that the planner can respond to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing the future -- creating it, constraining it, adapting to it. A futures study points the way.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College project are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

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SUMMARY

This article is a summary of an eighteen-month research project conducted by the authors for the POST Command College on Strategies for handling SWAT situations in Ventura County during the next ten years.

Ventura County, California, is but one of the regions in the State that is in the process of reexamining its law enforcement services. Ventura County is a mid-size county with approximately 700,000 residents. Its close proximity to Los Angeles County presents it with many of the same law enforcement problems endemic to its southerly partner. Residents enjoy a tremendous selection of lifestyles, from mountain and beach resorts to desert and metropolitan communities.

It is also home to ten incorporated cities, five of which have their own police departments. The remaining five, and all unincorporated areas, are policed by the Ventura County Sheriff's Department. Each police department and the Sheriff's Department, operates several specialized units, including homicide, narcotics, gang intervention, and Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) units. Each agency has also participated in joint narcotics and gang-related task forces.

The rapid increase in high-risk situations involving SWAT Teams throughout Ventura County frequently highlight newspaper headlines. Even in the most efficient and organized police organizations, occasions constantly arise requiring special operational planning and execution.[1] While high profile cases broadcast the need for SWAT teams, daily violent encounters account for most of the activity. In a 1993 article in the California Peace Officers Association Journal, suggested that:

> *"Justification for [SWAT] teams is found in the daily encounters that occur in this country between law enforcement personnel and suspects fleeing from crime, mentally disturbed individuals, and those involved in domestic violence. Routine incidents such as these account for far more gun battles and loss of innocent lives than the most newsworthy conflicts between police and organized groups."* [2]

The increase in SWAT situations seems to show no sign of abating. Data compiled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) shows a 50% increase in the use

of their Special Weapons Unit in the last five years, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) has shown a 47% increase, San Francisco Police Department a 40% increase, and the New York Police Department a 62% increase. These increases show the growing needs for Special Response Teams, not only with Barricaded/Hostage situations, but the near 100% increase in search warrant services that these same agencies have experienced since 1985.

Consider some of these forecasts of the futurE as developed by a panel of experts and the authors:

- Violent crimes are projected to increase during the next five years.
- The increased violence of criminal gangs will increase interdiction activities by SWAT teams.
- The Three Strikes law will place more repeat offenders in a situation of "I have nothing to lose," increasing the number of high risk situations.
- Increased education and involvement by political leaders will require a more consistent approach and resolution to critical incidents.
- Financial constraints will encourage increased use of joint power's agreements in a variety of areas. These agreements will help to mitigate the increasing costs of equipment, new technology, training, and litigation.

Evidenced by the operation in Waco, Texas, and based upon the conclusions of the interagency working group that studied this incident, the SWAT mission is ill-defined and the overall operational goal is lost in rhetoric and media hype. Professionalism requires that simple, straightforward definitions maintain the requisite focus and operational goals.

What is SWAT? The Los Angeles Police Department defined the concept of SWAT in the late sixties as a specialized group of officers, with special training and equipment, formed to handle tactical situations beyond the scope of normal police activity. Even the Los Angeles Times, in April of 1994, described SWAT Teams as "a

unit whose officers routinely perform some of the most arduous and challenging duties faced by law enforcement anywhere."

Undeniably, the role of Special Weapons and Tactics Teams throughout the United States and the world has become an accepted part of the law enforcement arsenal, and has continued to grow in stature and respect. When forecasting which path is best for handling future high-risk incidents, reviewing what history has to offer is important.

The use of a group of specially trained individuals to handle high risk incidents is not a new phenomenon. The Chinese author, Wu Ch'i 430-381 B.C., wrote:

"They selected and summoned worthy men of talent, in order to prepare themselves for any contingency."

Civil unrest in the United States during the late sixties and the rise in terrorism throughout Europe in the early seventies forced law enforcement to seriously assess their capabilities in handling high-risk situations. Most European countries only began to consider the use of specially trained SWAT or anti-terrorist teams in 1972 and 1973 when the face of terrorism had already engulfed the old world. Local police came face to face with their own inability to cope with these well-armed and well-trained terrorist groups. Unfortunately, Europe needed the slaughter at the Olympics in Munich to prove that the average police officer, conventional police tactics, and standard equipment were insufficient to meet the challenge.[3]

Prior to 1966, few, if any law enforcement agencies had SWAT teams to handle high risk situations. In August of 1966, the now infamous "Texas Tower Incident" in Austin, Texas, not unlike the attack in Munich, would push law enforcement to assess their capabilities in handling high-risk situations.

More recently, the multi-agency debacle at Waco, Texas, on February 28, 1993, has reinforced the point that the law enforcement agency of the future must continuously assess their capabilities, but in a far greater scope and range of possibilities. That fifty-one-day stand-off culminated in the death of seventy-eight people.[4] The associated financial costs were tremendous, well beyond the resources

of a single local agency. The estimated costs for the operation in Waco were more than $1.3 million per week. [5]

To successfully resolve SWAT situations, police administrators must have proper tactical options available at their disposal. One of those tactical options is based on the concept of regionalization. Regionalization is not a new idea and has been the topic of past study. Traditionally, local police departments have worked against attempts to consolidate or form multi-agency teams. According to William P. Horgan of the Massachusetts State Police:

> *The strong desire of early American communities to run their own affairs, the difficulties of travel and the lack of communications all tended to reinforce the emphasis on local control. Early settlers in America were too busy subdividing a continent to give much thought to what would be required to run a successful police operation.*[6]

Consolidation may contribute to better trained personnel and an increase in efficiency. California State University, Long Beach Professor John Kenny, stated in a journal article:

> *Consolidation of small and medium sized agencies presents an opportunity for innovation, that may alter the structure of police departments and thus improve the quality of delivery of police services.*[7]

During the past twenty-four months in Ventura County, there have been five highly-publicized joint agency operations, in which more than 150 law enforcement officers from six police agencies arrested more than twenty murder suspects from three notorious gang related shootings. Ventura County Sheriff Larry Carpenter said,

> *"What you're seeing is the wave of the future, police agencies working together to solve major cases, in this case SWAT teams joining forces to handle a very dangerous job."*[8]

This research project has further convinced the authors of the value of regionalized problem solving for the myriad of problems confronting metropolitan and rural America. Public/private/civic partnerships are a key strategy in dealing with these problems and taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the new global economy.

This regionalization/consolidation movement in the United States is converging with a technology revolution that has the potential to alter the basic ways that Law Enforcement in Ventura County handles high risk situations and also throughout the country. The formulation of multi-use tactical units on a regional basis makes it possible to handle a variety of high-risk applications with substantial budget savings and a minimum effect on staffing. This, coupled with the boom in technology related military dual-use items and communication equipment, will alter law enforcement's approach over the next ten years.

Especially significant are the developments in less-than-lethal technology and communication tools. As determined by the research, the significant increase in litigation concerning tactical situations makes it absolutely crucial that emerging technology is incorporated into every tactical approach. Concerns about how this technology is used and the related command and control issues could prevent implementation of these new technologies. It will be the challenge of police managers to address these issues so that they can realize the beneficial effects.

The strategic plan of the authors studies calls for the establishment of an oversight committee to start a regionalized tactical unit in Ventura County. The plan calls for a cooperative, joint effort between the local law enforcement agencies, the County Sheriff, and city/county government officials to enhance the response to high risk and SWAT situations in the County. This, coupled with the use of advanced technology and regionalized training, moves local agencies toward a more advanced and sophisticated approach to the ever-increasing issue of violence in our society.

The technological options available only begin to be illustrated by the following incident:

> *"The police officer slowly, cautiously approaches the entrance to the besieged apartment. After getting his bearings, he charges through an already opened front door. Scanning the living room, he makes his way to the back bedroom, into which he knows murder suspect Craig Smith has retreated after five long hours of a stand-off. Opening the bedroom's closet door, he finds the suspect burrowed under a pile of laundry. Without fear or hesitation, he plunges his arm into the pile of clothes, exposing Smith. As the bewildered suspect tries to grab*

the clothing back, the officer fires his weapon, blasting a shotgun out of Smith's hand and disorienting him long enough for more officers to rush in and wrestle him into handcuffs. The tense ordeal is over. As an ambulance is called to take the wounded man to the hospital, and as police, the press, and frightened tenants scurry about, the arresting officer moves unceremoniously out of the building and up a ramp into his custom-made berth in the back of a van marked "Hazardous Materials Unit."[13]

The "police officer" here is not one person but two human operators and a rather crude 480-pound robot. The scenario is not from "Star Trek" but from Prince George's County, Maryland. Besides robotics, developments in less-than-lethal weaponry and computerization continuously unfold. The NCIC 2000 project will list specifications for laptop computers with peripheral devices such as mobile cameras and fingerprint scanners to mention but one.

In the not-so-distant future, a SWAT team can make entry into a building as if they had been there often. The PolyShop project developed by the Army's Simulation and Instrumentation Command is ground-breaking work that will produce a networked virtual CAD environment. A modeler sits at a desk and builds a world that they can populate as needed, in a 3D environment on a computer screen. They produce the desktop in virtual reality with the modeler wearing chordic input gloves. This means that the interface is completely intuitive allowing the modeler to simply reach out and grasp objects, moving, stretching, and twisting them as they would be in the real world.

The regional and/or multi-agency approach for tools such as those mentioned above spreads the cost over a broader base, resulting in a more feasible alternative. Non-traditional resources include technological exchange with the military. An excellent example of this exchange is the California Counter-Drug Procurement Program, in which the State of California acts as a broker for military supplies at a greatly reduced cost. It will be essential that law enforcement managers use these creative and innovative methods in seeking out funding sources for new approaches.

The evaluation of the strategic issues raised in this study calls for a multi-disciplinary look at a variety of related facets. The basic criteria must include cost,

maintenance of technology, training, effectiveness, practicality, and command and control. We cannot overstate the formulation of basic policies and procedures. We cannot overlook input from the private sector.

Finally, the overarching question still remains - is there a political will to do what the writers have proposed? - and if there is, is this approach the best way to do it? Is this cost-effective approach and is there a benefit to the local agencies? While the researchers have explored a variety of areas and have examined other areas of the country where this approach has been effective, it remains to be seen whether we can adequately answer the issues raised during the study and whether this cooperative approach is feasible. Devising regional approaches to urban and rural problems is often technically and financially complex, and politically difficult. The fact that the issues here are high risk SWAT situations only exacerbates that complexity. To advance such approaches, local and regional policy officials and professionals must have highly-developed leadership skills and abilities to communicate, negotiate, and build partnerships across and among a broad array of interest groups and diverse communities. Examining these areas of common concern will be important for police managers and with the California Peace Officers' Standards and Training Commission, determine appropriate responses to this vital law enforcement area. Copies of the complete study can be obtained by contacting the POST library.

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