

THE FUTURE OF AIR SUPPORT UNITS IN PREVENTING AND REACTING TO
TERRORISM

Article

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ARTICLE

THE FUTURE OF AIR SUPPORT UNITS IN PREVENTING AND REACTING TO TERRORISM

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"Police Interrupt Terrorist Attack at Stadium"

Acting quickly and using a plan that had been previously practiced, the police department, sheriff's department, and highway patrol combined forces to avert what was sure to be incredible carnage at the football stadium last night.

Police received tips that numerous terrorists in several vans were headed to the stadium armed with rifles. Immediately all three agencies alerted their air support personnel who were already on patrol around the metropolitan area. Increased funding for air operations in the past year have allowed for more flight time for the agencies, almost assuring that three helicopters are in the air each night.

The three helicopters immediately set into action the plan they have practiced before in which they respond to predesignated sections of the city and observe main streets looking for any vehicles matching the description of vehicles alleged to be involved in criminal activity. The police department's recently acquired addition to its fleet, a five-passenger turbine helicopter, was mobilized at the heliport and picked up four heavily armed tactical officers who

had been on a special assignment in another part of town. These officers were flown to the stadium, where they were dropped off to deploy to strategic positions in case the terrorists made it to the stadium.

Within minutes, two vans were spotted by two of the helicopters patrolling the area. The helicopters used their tracking devices to “lock-on” to the vans’ whereabouts, which allowed continual tracking even when the vans turned off their lights and led the helicopters on high-speed pursuits. Ultimately, the helicopter crews used vehicle-disabling technology to cause the vans to stop. The occupants exited the vans and fled into the darkness, however, the helicopters infrared video revealed the suspects’ locations. The suspects were later taken into custody after SWAT was deployed to the area.

The highway patrol’s helicopter spotted a third van as it reached the stadium parking lot. Five terrorists exited the van, armed with sniper rifles. As the suspects moved toward the stadium, the helicopter’s tactical flight officer began saturating the area around the terrorists with “cover-fire” from his high-powered rifle. The officer was supplied with and trained to use this weapon by the military as a result of last year’s cross-training and mutual deployment guidelines developed between the military and local police. The terrorists were locked down by the rifle fire from the helicopter, enabling the tactical team brought in by the police department’s new helicopter to engage the suspects with their high-powered weapons. Three terrorists were killed and the other two surrendered.”

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Is an ideal future of air support units like this possible for local law enforcement agencies around the country? The development and integration of new technology, the seamlessness of

efforts between agencies, the availability of well-qualified personnel, and public support of enhanced air operations are lofty goals. However, it is incumbent for law enforcement leaders to plan for the future in order to create a desired future state of air operations and avoid catastrophic consequences that accompany lack of preparation.

On September 11, 2001, when the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon near Washington, D.C., were attacked by domestic airplanes hijacked by international terrorists, domestic aircraft played a key role in rescue, recovery and surveillance efforts. Immediately after the attack in New York City, numerous helicopters arrived in the area equipped with medical supplies, medical personnel, and tactical response teams. Law enforcement and medical transport helicopters were just about the only aircraft flying in the New York City area following the attack, and these images were prevalent in the media coverage that followed.¹

When the Pentagon in Virginia was attacked by a hijacked airliner a United States Park Police helicopter arrived within four minutes. This helicopter was equipped to evacuate as many as four injured people at a time. However, immediately after its arrival, its mission changed to being in command and control of the airspace above the pentagon. Shortly thereafter, a D.C. Metropolitan Police helicopter arrived and took over this assignment. The pilot of the D.C. Police helicopter would later say:

It was a hairy time, let me tell you. We were on station all day and must have been handling 20 helicopters at one point. We were duking it out with the F-16s and all the other aircraft, telling them where to go, where to park, what altitudes to hold, when not to come in. We were the only eyes up there, the only ones to tell our guys what was happening.²

It is clear that local law enforcement will have a role in the future efforts to prevent and

respond to domestic terrorism. Law enforcement managers will need to develop the best strategies to impact this challenge.

TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Air support units stand to benefit greatly as technological developments are made that can assist these units in their missions. Emerging technology promises to increase night vision capabilities of pilots and tactical flight officers through the use of more sophisticated goggles and night vision compatible display panels in the aircraft. Advancements are being made in searchlight capabilities, laser illuminators, color cameras, thermal imaging systems, and “moving maps” that display the aircrafts location in relation to its destination and indicate airspace and jurisdictional boundaries.³

Improved technology will allow for better surveillance and tracking of criminal suspects. Improved aircraft will become effective aerial command posts. Movement of people, equipment, and supplies can be done much easier. Implications for medical evacuations and control of the skies abound. Expense and lack of familiarization with potential uses of aircraft have impeded the achievement of a desired state of air operations in local law enforcement agencies. Training and interagency coordination have been lacking.

There are many potential uses of law enforcement air support units that stretch the current bounds of the imagination, yet they need to be forecast and planned. These include: closer alliance with law enforcement’s military counterparts; using aircraft as a shooting platform for air to ground weapons, or even air to air strikes; employing vehicle disabling technology to stop fleeing vehicles; locking onto a vehicle and continually broadcasting video of it to down-

linked monitors in patrol vehicles; and, the use of unmanned aerial vehicles.

Recently, the United States Border Patrol has been using Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) to assist in patrolling the U.S.-Mexico border. There could be many uses for UAVs by local agencies in their efforts to prevent and to react effectively to terrorism. Imagine a UAV locking onto a terrorist's vehicle and monitoring its whereabouts unbeknownst to the occupants. The potential for a UAV delivering a deadly strike when lethal force is appropriate also presents serious logistical, legal, technological, and ethical questions. However, it can be reasonably forecast that law enforcement leaders in the future will be faced with issues such as this.

In addition to law enforcement's need to prepare for attacks that are random as to time and place, there are targets that can be foreseen as being attractive to terrorists. These include bridges, dams, power plants, airports, interstate freeways, government buildings, and aqueducts.

BUILDING CONSENSUS

It is essential that law enforcement leaders who will have an impact on how air support units deal with terrorism lend their support to the transition to an enhanced air support unit. Leadership in law enforcement agencies must also identify key stakeholders and work to gain their commitment to change. These stakeholders include: city council; city manager; police management; air support members; officers association; the community; the military; and, allied agencies.

A transitional team is helpful in ensuring that meetings are held, deadlines are met, and the transition remains on pace. But most important, someone should be designated to lead the transition. This person must have the capacity for forming a vision, the creativity to make the

vision compelling, and the persuasive ability to keep the transition team cohesive, dedicated, and on task.

The transitional leader must be in a position to advocate for and make the change happen. The transitional leader should begin setting up policy, training, and procurement procedures that will become fully implemented upon the change taking effect. As such, it is helpful if leaders have the power to reward activities and decisions that further the desired change, and to sanction actions that maliciously block the change.

ENSURING POSITIVE RESULTS

Just as critical as the strategic planning and implementation process is the evaluative component. An on-going evaluation should be done to ensure the transition is occurring at the pre-planned speed. Everyone involved in the process deserves to know the status of the transition process and any shortcomings that need to be rectified. Likewise, reports of successful aspects of the transitional process can serve to buoy the stakeholders' attitudes. The evaluation of the change process will serve to verify that time lines and benchmarks are being met throughout the process. Procedures for remedy must be established when shortcomings in the process are identified. People or groups must be designated for ensuring the problems are corrected.

An evaluation component must also be established for when the transitional process has been completed and the desired future state is in place. Monitoring the effectiveness of the change must be constant and reliable. This will serve to justify the change as well as to identify what additional changes, fine-tuning, or major revisions of the new state of the organization are needed to achieve a desired state of operations.

LEADERSHIP'S ROLE

Leadership will play a tremendous role in developing air support capabilities to combat domestic terrorism. There is great potential for leadership within the organization to step forward with a bold vision and challenging goals, then foster an environment that is conducive to creating the desired future state. Leaders must use their attributes of persuasion, motivation, empowerment, and coalescence to foster the transition.

The transitional process offers the opportunity to enhance the organization through a futuristic approach to air support. Proper planning and effective transition management by agency leadership regarding equipment, technology, training, interagency cooperation, and community support provide the best chance for creating a positive future. Agency leadership is also in a position to act as pioneers in this field and to become catalysts for other agencies to create improved future states of their air support operations. Agencies that fail to plan and do not transition to improved air support capabilities may be flirting with disaster if trends and events in domestic terrorism increase.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Creating the desired future state of air support operations comes with increased financial costs. This research has shown that resistance from governing bodies and appointed officials may be encountered due to funding issues. Alternative methods of funding such as grants, public donations, and sponsorships should be explored to mitigate the direct burden to municipal finances.

The Fresno Police Department's air support unit was created in the late 1990s with the help of a grassroots organization called "Citizens for a Safer Fresno County." This non-profit

organization is apolitical and self-funding.⁴ The organization raised enough money by soliciting all facets of the community to help make the purchase of the department's first helicopter. This is an example of the potential for private sources of funding to be mixed with government allocations as an alternative funding strategy.

The Fresno Police Department's new turbine helicopter was financed using asset forfeiture funds pursuant to narcotics arrests. This is another example of unconventional financing that is available to large urban agencies.

Though the costs associated with acquiring new technology and aircraft can be quite high, these costs may pale in comparison to costs associated with a terrorist event. Overtime costs in the aftermath of such an event, and costs for repair, debris removal, medical treatment, and investigation could easily pose an insurmountable burden on local government.

In addition to financial impacts of a terrorist attack, the cost to public confidence and ultimately the loss of public support of local law enforcement could be devastating. This points to the necessity of identifying efficiencies in the spending plan needed to create the desired future state. Leadership in local law enforcement agencies must be forward thinking and aggressive in creating and sustaining a vision of the desired future state of its air support operations. A strategic plan must be formulated that involves all stakeholders and moves them to a position of commitment that offers the best chance for a successful transition to the desired state. The desired state entails superior performing aircraft, equipped with the latest technology. The ideal air support unit should be staffed with well-trained personnel, working collaboratively with allied agencies. These elements will enable the broadening of the air support mission while increasing efficiency and effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

Technological developments and aircraft improvements provide an excellent opportunity for the forward looking leader to act as a visionary and a conduit for positive change which leads to the desired future state of air operations. Strategic planning is the vehicle through which the desired transformation can take place. A spirit of inclusiveness in designing and implementing leadership's vision will minimize the obstacles to change that are encountered.

Nothing less than community safety is at stake in the future efforts to prevent and react to acts of domestic terrorism. The financial costs of developing an effective, future-oriented air support unit will be burdensome to local government. However, the cost of being ill prepared to deal with a catastrophic terrorist event could be devastating, not only to the local economy, but also to the emotional health of the community. It is critical that law enforcement leaders become future-oriented, bold, and inclusive in their approach to improving air support units. They must create a compelling vision, then provide a positive environment that motivates stakeholders to help turn the vision into reality.

ENDNOTES

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