

PREPARING FOR THE WORST

/Kelly Foreman,
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Kentucky's tactical teams face the gravest of dangers

Recreating a plot created by Stephen King, a 17-year-old boy armed with a shotgun, revolver and automatic pistol took hostage 11 of his classmates for more than seven hours.

The hostage taker was not a big-city terrorist or professional gunman. He was a small-town teen from McKee, Ky., a city with a population of about 250 people at the time, who just wanted to see his dad.

That was 1989, and national media turned its attention to school shootings.

Four years later the violence escalated. An exceptionally bright student in Carter County, Ky., opened fire on his teacher and a custodian, killing both. Twenty-two students in the classroom trembled in fear for their lives until police talked 17-year-old Scott Pennington out of the room.

Another four years passed. More than 350 miles west of Carter County in Paducah, a 14-year-old student told teachers the blanket he carried containing two rifles and two shotguns was an art project. Before going to class, Michael Carneal pulled a pistol from his bag and began firing into a circle of praying students. Three were killed; five were wounded by the bullets. >>



Nearly a year and a half later, the term “school shooting” was on the tongues of law enforcement, school officials and parents everywhere after 13 students and teachers were killed in the Columbine High School massacre in Littleton, Colo.

Obviously, those who think Kentucky is immune to the kinds of mass-casualty tragedies that have occurred all too frequently nationwide need to think again, said Kentucky Tactical Officers Association President Tony Cobaugh.

“We would all like to live in the bubble and think, ‘Hey, that thing that happened over there in that little 20,000-populated town where those bad people took over that school, that will never happen here,’” said Cobaugh, who also serves as commander for Louisville Metro Police Special Weapons and Tactics.

“If we believe that will never happen here, then it probably will,” Cobaugh continued. “And then when you are not prepared and your response is less than acceptable, and more lives than should have perished — that to me is the measuring stick. You think of the worst situation and prepare for that,

which is a school take-over — because every community has a school — and you start with that mindset right there.”

Kentucky tactical teams and their support teams, such as hostage negotiators, bomb squads, search and rescue teams and more, offer a wide range of specialties to the commonwealth.

Like others across the nation, they all must train and be prepared for tragedies such as school shootings. But handling that type of situation is only one element of their work. Their job descriptions include facing the worst criminals and the most dangerous crimes that plague Kentucky communities.

VARIETY OF TEAMS

When the KTOA first was formed three-and-a-half years ago, Cobaugh said the group identified approximately 60 tactical teams across the commonwealth. The size and makeup of Kentucky teams vary, but most average about 10 to 15 officers, Cobaugh said.

Only one team in the state operates as a full-time tactical unit: the Kentucky State Police Special Response Team.

Like most teams, the KSP SRT responds for hostage rescue, barricaded persons and service of high-risk warrants, said SRT Sgt. Jeremy Slinker. But they are responsible for a variety of other operations as well, such as high-risk surveillance and intelligence gathering and high-risk security transport such as death row inmates. At special events such as the Kentucky Derby and governor’s inauguration, the SRT also is on standby, just in case.

“We travel from the flat lands of western Kentucky to the mountains of eastern Kentucky,” Slinker said. “So, we deal with a lot of different people, and you have to come up with a lot of innovative ideas to deal with both. I think that is probably what makes us unique, is that we have such a variety of calls and a variety of places that we go.

“Our agency allows us to train to be experts in all these fields,” Slinker continued. “So if the incident calls for a high-risk

technique, like an explosives breach, our agency doesn’t hesitate in allowing us to use that because they know we have spent so much time perfecting it.”

As the team celebrated its 20th anniversary as full-time operators last year, Slinker said the calls for service rose dramatically.

Last fall, Slinker said, “this last year and a half, starting late 2007 to the current time, we have been as busy as we have been over the past several years.

“I think it was in 2005 and 2006 when we did 20 and 24 calls those two years,” Slinker continued. “In 2007 we had 34, then we went to 77 in 2008 and we are pushing about that pace for 2009. We’re staying pretty steady.”

This year, Slinker said the calls for high-risk surveillance have really picked up and the team had responded to about 35 calls by mid-July.

After eight years of service to the team, Slinker attributes the rise in calls to a paradigm shift in which the team no longer serves as a last resort.

“We have sold ourselves as a support part of this agency,” Slinker said. “We went out to our agency and told them, ‘We are not here for you when it gets so dangerous you can’t handle it. Just don’t think of us that way.’ Police in general hate to ever actually come out and say, ‘Hey, it’s too dangerous, I need some help.’ So we wanted to get out of that mindset of just calling our team when it’s super dangerous.”

COMBINING RESOURCES

Two challenges many chiefs and sheriffs face when it comes to establishing a tactical team are the limitations of manpower and resources. In northern Kentucky, the leaders of 10 different agencies recognized these limitations and created the Northern Kentucky Emergency Response Unit.

The NKY ERU consists of team leaders from Fort Mitchell and Taylor Mill as well as operators from Independence, Erlanger, Fort Wright, Ludlow, Edgewood and the Kenton County Sheriff’s office. Two volunteer tactical medics from St. Elizabeth Medical Center round out the team.

“The current makeup of the team is a mix of the old emergency response unit and the Independence-Elsmere Police SWAT team,” said Independence Police Capt. Jon Lonaker, commander of the team. “We merged just about 11 years ago to form the current Northern Kentucky Emergency Response Unit.”

An inter-local agreement was signed by all the participating agencies to form the unit, which is governed by two participating chiefs. All the chiefs form a board of directors to make decisions about budgeting issues and other items that affect the team. Each department is responsible for dues for training and equipment, Lonaker said.

The team employs 12 officers from the various agencies and has contracts with other surrounding agencies, which pay a yearly fee to use the multi-agency ERU’s services when necessary. The team’s duties include service of high-risk arrest and search warrants, dealing with barricaded subjects and hostage situations, fugitive searches, dignitary protection and anything else that falls within their training. >>



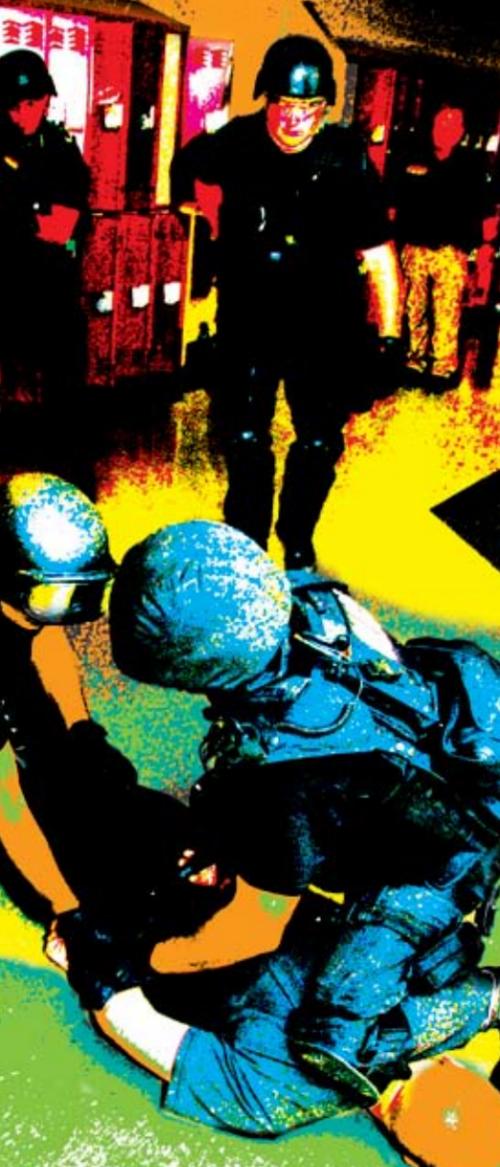
KENTUCKY STATE POLICE SPECIAL RESPONSE TEAM, THE ONLY FULL-TIME TACTICAL TEAM IN KENTUCKY, TRAINS AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK AS THEIR SCHEDULE ALLOWS BETWEEN CALL OUTS. THE TEAM PRACTICED VEHICLE ASSAULTS RECENTLY AT A TRAINING IN FORT KNOX.

/PHOTO BY JIM ROBERTSON



THE NORTHERN KENTUCKY EMERGENCY RESPONSE UNIT IS A GROUP OF AGENCIES THAT CAME TOGETHER TO FORM ONE TACTICAL TEAM, REALIZING THE AGENCIES COULD NOT SUPPORT SUCH A GROUP INDIVIDUALLY.

/PHOTO BY JIM ROBERTSON



With service to so many cities, Lonaker said the group stays pretty busy.

“We average one about every six to eight weeks,” Lonaker said last fall. “January 2, (2009) we had a call out for a guy who shot his wife and barricaded himself in his house. Two days later we had a guy who threatened his wife with a gun, she left, and then he wouldn’t answer the door and we had to go in to get him. You just never know, it’s crazy. Then we will go two to three months without anything.”

After 10 years of service as the team’s commander, Lonaker said there is good and bad in having a multi-jurisdictional team.

“The good thing is the guys don’t work together all the time, so when we get together once a month we’re not on each other’s nerves as we would with normal co-workers,” he said. “There are some logistical difficulties sometimes just with getting purchases because there are so many agencies to go through to get what information we need. But overall it runs pretty smoothly, especially with the administrators we have. They have been very supportive of the team.”

SUPPORT TEAMS

While tactical teams are responsible for a variety of calls, even the largest teams are limited in what they can do on their own. For that reason, tactical support teams are an equally important part of any agency working to protect its citizens from tragedy.

Bomb squads, hostage negotiators, underwater search and recovery teams, meth lab clean-up teams and rescue teams also bring additional expertise to intense and dangerous situations.

In Frankfort, Capt. Jeff Rogers leads a team of three other hostage negotiators, which are separate from the agency’s Tactical Response Unit.

“Basically, when it was first started, it was decided that the four general detectives would be trained and respond to these types of situations because we were already subject to be called out on crime scenes and were already in plain clothes,” Rogers said. “Which at the time, they were kind of leaning toward the best case scenario, which would be for someone dressed in something other than a uniform to respond to that situation. Then it just grew from there.”

Rogers, Detective Mike Johnson, Officer David Dearborn and Detective Joe Banta have worked together as negotiations team for more than 10 years. The team responds to calls with hostages, barricaded subjects and situations with suicidal or mentally ill people who need to be negotiated with in order to come to a peaceful resolution, Rogers said.

The ultimate goal of the hostage negotiation team and the TRU are basically the same, Rogers said, but sometimes the methods by which they reach that goal are different.

“Anytime you go in with a show of force, if that person is armed, someone could get hurt,” he said. “He could hurt himself, he could hurt innocent bystanders — especially if he has a hostage he is holding against his or her will. Of course, the police are main targets when they go through that front door. So, it is always, in my opinion, the best course of action to stabilize that situation, >>

secure it and then attempt to verbally get this person to come out and resolve that situation just to reduce the chances of someone getting hurt.”

Paducah’s bomb squad follows the same theory of keeping people from harm as Frankfort’s hostage negotiators.

“When we respond to a suspicious package that turns out to be nothing, we get a lot of people apologizing, saying ‘We are sorry we called you all out, we’re sorry we bothered you,’” said Paducah Police Commander Will Gilbert. “And what they don’t understand is they’re not bothering us. We would much rather respond to 50 fake packages than respond to one that was real that somebody handled and was killed or injured.”

Paducah is one team of four Paducah police officers and two Mercy Regional paramedics who all respond to 13 counties in western Kentucky. The first bomb technician was trained nearly 30 years ago, but the team has been operating as a fully accredited squad since 1999, Gilbert said.

Day-to-day calls vary from suspicious packages to known explosives, like those located by relatives of deceased family members in a barn, shed or garage, Gilbert said. While he said he does not like to spread fear, Gilbert said it is important to recognize that Kentucky is home to several locations that can be considered terrorist targets.

“It’s not that I’m worried about Al Qaeda rolling into the city of Paducah, but in this day and age, if you don’t have us, who else are you going to call if Carlisle County has a bomb or old explosives or what not?” Gilbert asked. “If we weren’t around, then they would have to wait on Owensboro. If Owensboro wasn’t there, then they would have to wait on KSP and KSP’s bomb techs are in the Louisville-Lexington area.”

Cops, firemen and paramedics often have a “hero complex” about them, Gilbert said, and are natural problem solvers.

“We feel like there is no problem that we can’t solve,” Gilbert said. “There is a positive in that everybody wants to serve and do their best for their communities

— but the problem with that is officers could find themselves handling something they shouldn’t or thinking less about it than what they should. There have been many instances where we have responded where officers have handled pipe bombs or suspicious packages and the best thing is to just leave it alone. We’re the trained guys and we don’t even handle them.”

ADVICE FOR COMMUNITIES

Tactical teams require money, manpower, equipment and intense training. But Cobaugh said there definitely are benefits for communities that employ them.

“[For example,] the mentally ill consumer who has a bad day downtown on 4th Street,” Cobaugh said. “We are going to be better suited to handle that situation. We don’t need to wait two or three hours for another tactical team from hours away to come here. We should be able to handle this,” he continued.

The same principals apply to agencies that implement new strategies to address the community drug problem, Cobaugh said. >>



A NORTHERN KENTUCKY EMERGENCY RESPONSE UNIT OFFICER SEARCHES A LOCAL SCHOOL FOR A SUSPECT DURING TRAINING ABOUT ACTIVE SHOOTERS.

/PHOTO BY JIM ROBERTSON

THE KSP SRT RESPONDS FOR A VARIETY OF OPERATIONS, INCLUDING HOSTAGE RESCUE, SERVICE OF HIGH-RISK WARRANTS AND GATHERING INTELLIGENCE DURING HIGH-RISK SURVEILLANCE.

/PHOTO BY JIM ROBERTSON



“Then there is that other component — high-risk warrant service,” he said. “Crime in progress involving a criminal who takes hostages. Or someone does something bad at our schools.

“Are those not reasons enough to at least sit down and talk about why we do not have a team in our area?” Cobaugh asked. “Could these things not occur? Yes, they could. Can we do it?”

Cobaugh recognizes that some departments are not large enough to shoulder their own tactical response team. But he encourages those agencies to begin talking with the other municipal and county police and sheriffs in their area who might be able to develop a multi-agency team.

“Wise police administrators and leaders — that is where the discussions should begin, at the top in an area. The heads of those departments should be sitting down and should talk about this first. Then they should say, ‘Hey, what about forming a multi-jurisdictional or regional team.’”

Any leader or group of leaders who decide to create a team should make creation of a clearly-defined mission statement a top priority, Cobaugh said.

“You must provide training,” he said. “You must provide the proper equipment. You cannot just throw something like this together. A community has to make a commitment with standards, a mission, training and equipment. And that is not just initially, that must be sustained to continue the team and the mission that it serves. Those communities that make that commitment are the wisest communities in the commonwealth.”

