



# Multi-jurisdictional SWAT and the new NTOA SWAT Standards

By Tom Nolan



As the NTOA Section Chair for Multi-jurisdictional SWAT, I often get calls and e-mails from officers whose agencies are considering forming a multi-jurisdictional SWAT team. All ask some very important questions, and it is obvious they have some real concerns about the pending formation of the team. Most of them inevitably ask the same question: Can we keep our own team and just work with the other teams? The simple answer is **no**, not if you truly want to be a multi-jurisdictional SWAT team.

By definition, a multi-jurisdictional SWAT team is a team made up of officers, equipment and additional resources from more than one police jurisdiction. It is one team, not a group of teams working

together when needed, as in the case of a regionalization of SWAT teams. According to the definition of SWAT found in Section 1.0 (Definition of SWAT) in the new NTOA SWAT Standards:<sup>1</sup>

“A Special Weapons and Tactics team is a designated law enforcement team whose members are recruited, selected, trained, equipped and assigned to resolve critical incidents involving a threat to public safety which would otherwise exceed the capabilities of traditional law enforcement first responders and/or investigative units.”

As the definition clearly states, a SWAT team is a “designated law enforcement team,” not “a group of law enforcement teams.” Section 4.0 of the same document reads as follows:

## Element leader giving last minute instructions

“Where size and/or demographics limit the capabilities of an agency, these standards require that multi-jurisdictional resources will be combined and coordinated in a manner which is consistent with reliable tactics, techniques and procedures.”

While the standards define and allow for a multi-jurisdictional SWAT team, they do not mandate it. Law enforcement agencies may choose to continue the practice of having their own stand-alone team, using only resources within their own agency. Those agencies will make the choice based on a number of factors, such as personnel and financial resources,



Critical skills maintenance should cover all types of team movements

anticipated activity levels and command and control issues. With the recent addition of Section 9.0 of the standards, the NTOA has provided an alternate means to comply with the standard. In those instances where the agency leadership prefers not to hold membership in a multi-jurisdictional team and has an insufficient numbers of personnel to meet the standards, the agency may enter into a joint response memorandum of agreement (MOA) with a neighboring small-agency team.

The issue of whether the team will be full-time or a collateral duty team is one that may affect the decision. Since only about two percent of the nearly 18,000 law enforcement agencies have more than 250 officers, the number of agencies who can field properly staffed stand-alone teams are in the minority. For the purposes of this article, I will be discussing the majority of law enforcement agencies in America who need a SWAT team but do not have the resources to properly staff it within their own agency.

### Staffing

Staffing levels is one of the first questions to be answered when contemplating the formation of a SWAT team. If we are staffing a team based on the definition of a SWAT team in the NTOA standards, then we are accepting mission assignments such as high

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risk warrant service, barricaded subjects and hostage-taking incidents. As NTOA SWAT Standards state, the SWAT team must be able to “responsibly engage in the following operations, in accordance with Section 4.1 of NTOA standards; at a minimum this shall include:

- Tactical command
- Containment
- Emergency action
- Deliberate action
- Precision long rifle.”

Two key words in that statement are “responsibly engage.” If your entire team is a 10-person unit, your tactical elements will be much smaller than they should be based on current tactical concepts. These smaller elements will be trying to perform functions beyond their realistic capability. Is a two-person element going to be able to “responsibly engage” in containment on a barricaded subject incident? Is a three-person element

going to be able to “responsibly engage” in a deliberate action such as a hostage rescue attempt? Are dedicated men and women going to valiantly try to achieve these objectives with such limited resources? Absolutely, if that is what you have tasked them to do because you have not properly staffed your SWAT team. Ultimately, as an agency, you are going to have to understand that you are not acting responsibly.

Limited staffing on a SWAT team not only puts the SWAT officers in jeopardy, but it also places the public in danger because it will lead to poor tactics. For example, if we have an adequately staffed SWAT team on a hostage-taking incident, we will have sufficient resources to have an emergency action team in place just in case things take a bad turn while the deliberate action team is rehearsing the hostage rescue attempt. This rehearsal may make the difference between life and death for the hostage(s), but this step may be skipped if we don’t have a sufficient number of personnel to staff both an emergency action team and a deliberate action team. While this is just one example, it clearly shows what can go wrong if the SWAT team is not sufficiently staffed.

### Training

The issue of training hours is another aspect of the NTOA standards that are causing much concern and discussion in the SWAT community. Section 5.4 of the NTOA SWAT Standards specifies that agencies must devise SOPs with appropriate guidelines for team activities, including training:

“Minimum Training Standards – Collateral Part Time SWAT:

Prerequisite: 40 hours basic SWAT course

Monthly: 16 hours critical skills maintenance

Specialty Assignments: An additional 8 hours per month (i.e., long rifle, TEMS, etc.)

Annual: 40 hours in-service full team training”

Most of the complaints regarding the 16 hours per month of training are due to the fact that the new requirement will cause departments to send officers to two days

of SWAT training per month, as opposed to the one day that many are currently doing. While the individual officers do not usually have a problem with the additional training, they are concerned that their chief (or chiefs, in the case of a multi-jurisdictional team) will take a stand against increased training time. There may be a number of department administrators who will disagree with and oppose the number of required hours of training. NTOA has taken this into consideration. Section 9.0 is providing an alternate means of complying with the standards by allowing regular departmental training to be combined with regular SWAT training to meet the 16-hour requirement.

There is concern among the SWAT community that some police administrators will ignore the standards, while others may consider disbanding their SWAT team. Both of these decisions must not be made without a great deal of consideration. While there certainly are many potential operational and budgetary concerns about scheduling and manpower issues, adopting these standards will enhance the physical and legal safety of team members engaged in the department-sponsored, high-risk and potentially life-threatening activity. These standards were written by the subject-matter experts. Ignoring the standards will not resolve the issue or make the standards disappear. The SWAT standards are being adopted by many agencies because it is the right and ethical thing to do and it will aid in the agencies' risk management. Agencies who disregard the standards must be able to articulate their reasons for making this decision in the event they become involved in litigation involving their SWAT team.

Those who speak of disbanding their team will have to decide if that is a decision that they could ultimately defend. They must ask themselves why they got involved with a SWAT team in the first place. Hopefully, it was not because they were following a trend, but rather because the agency had determined a real need existed for a SWAT team based upon crime trends and the increase in violent high-risk incidents that exceed the capabilities of traditional law enforcement officers and the need to resolve these critical incidents. Has this need changed because the train-



ing standards got tougher? Of course not, in most cases. It is comparable to the issue of increasing training time that bomb squads faced when their training standards got tougher.

The National Guidelines for Bomb Technicians, first developed in 1987, call for 16 hours per month and 40 hours per year, just like the new SWAT Standards (Section 5.1.2). When these bomb squad training requirements were adopted, then-current equipment requirements for bomb squads were very basic. Since that time, bomb squads have evolved toward more complex equipment, which bring a higher demand for proficiency training. Like most national organizations, the National Bomb Squad Commanders Advisory Board (NBSCAB) is perpetually torn between the need for more training for its members and resistance from departmental administrators who must make ends meet with the personnel resources they have. As the new mandate for every bomb squad to have a robot by April of 2009 looms, NBSCAB may not have found answers to all of the training challenges that robots bring, but the organization is committed to the minimum training standards it has established.

SWAT teams are also evolving toward more complex technology and tactics, and it is critical that our minimum training

Maintenance of critical skills requires practicing and refining the basics such as room entry

standards be established and accepted so our profession can be prepared for the challenges that we face.

## Conclusion

In general, standards are new to the law enforcement profession. Compared to other professions, we are way behind in this area. Organizations such as the National Bomb Squad Commanders Advisory Board (NBSCAB), the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), the Department of Homeland Security – Office for Bombing Prevention (DHS-OBP) and NTOA are trying to change that. There is much work that still needs to be accomplished, but at least we are headed in the right direction and it is what our membership SWAT commanders, team leaders and operators have asked NTOA to do — to take the lead on these tough issues. In the years to come, we will look back and wonder what all the concern was about and question how we could have ever doubted the need for these minimum standards.

No matter whether you are a full-time SWAT team for a large metropolitan area or a collateral duty team in the suburbs, the end product must be the same. To use an NCAA football analogy, you don't get to only handle Division III bad guys because your agency is in a lower crime area. The frequency of your call outs may be less, but you better be prepared to face Division IA bad guys at any time. Ultimately, agencies that comply with the new NTOA SWAT Standards will be much better prepared than those who are unwilling to change. ◀◀

## Endnote

1. NTOA SWAT Standards are available for download on the main page of [www.ntoa.org](http://www.ntoa.org).

## About the author

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