

Child burned by distraction device during raid

By Rob Moore *Editor*

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CLARKESVILLE - Habersham County Sheriff Joey Terrell now is talking about the high-risk warrant service that resulted in burns to a 2-year-old child early Wednesday.

The child was burned when narcotics agents, assisted by members of the Habersham Special Response Team, used a distraction device as they entered a home at 182 Lakeview Heights Circle outside Cornelia.

"We had prior information on it," Terrell said of the circumstances of the home and its occupants. "The individual had been involved in an altercation with another male involving a possible AK-47 [rifle] several months ago, and he was arrested on some weapons charges. Supposedly that was about drugs."

Terrell said agents followed standard procedure prior to obtaining a search warrant and planning the raid.

"When we did surveillance on the house, there were two guards standing guard at the door ... like they weren't letting anybody in," Terrell said. "We did make the buy out of the house. We took that information, along with our other information, and went to see the judge and got a warrant."

Terrell said the drug buy was made late Tuesday, but it was early Wednesday before the warrant could be obtained and served.

"Our team captain asked the normal questions - is there children?" Terrell said. "If there's children involved in a house, we do not use any kind of distraction devices in those houses. We just don't take the chance on it."

But there were no indications of children in the home.

"According to the confidential informant, there were no children," Terrell said. "When they made the buy, they didn't see any children or any evidence of children there, so we proceeded with our standard operation."

Because of recent history with the individual involved in the alleged drug sales and knowledge of weapons in the residence, the special agent seeking the search warrant requested a "no-knock" warrant, Terrell said.

Mountain Judicial Circuit Narcotics Criminal Investigation and Suppression Team agents obtained a search warrant for the residence, with the no knock entry provision approved by Habersham County Chief Magistrate Judge Jim Butterworth.

"Due to the previous information regarding assault-type weapons at the residence, the information regarding adult male subjects standing 'guard' in front of the residence, the fact that there was no safe way to approach the residence without being detected, the possibility of the destruction of evidence, and Wanis Thonetheva's criminal history which reflected charges of possession of a firearm during the commission of a felony and several charges of carrying a concealed weapon, agents contacted the Habersham County Sheriff's Office [Special Response Team] unit to assist with the execution of the search warrant and the securing of the residence," a report provided by Terrell states.

The three-bedroom, two-bath house is a single story with enclosed garage.

"We check the door; if it's unlocked we enter," Terrell said. "The door was locked, so they breached the door. There was an obstruction at the door. They tossed a 'flash bang'. Our team leader has been through the school on the use of the flash bangs - the distraction devices - is the only way we can even purchase them. We have to have a license, he has to go through the training."

Terrell said the training teaches officers to only throw the device three to five feet inside the door, to protect the occupants.

"He taught our team members how to do it," Terrell said. "They breached the door and one member tossed the device in, then we entered the room."

During the entry is when the child was burned.

"What had happened was there was a playpen - a Pack N Play - that was pushed up against the door, and when they breached the door it wouldn't open up because of the Pack N Play," Terrell said. "It was just wide enough to toss the flash bang in, then they had to physically push it [Pack N Play] on out of the way to get in. That's when the team medics saw the child, stopped at the child, took the child out and began first aid."

A waiting ambulance, which was standing by a short distance away, was called to transport the child.

"The door that we entered was the door that we bought dope out of - that's why entered at that door," Terrell said. "Our team went by the book. Given the same scenario, we'll do the same thing again. I stand behind what our team did."

The Habersham Special Response Team is a combination of sheriff's deputies and Cornelia police officers.

"We keep asking ourselves, 'how did this happen?'," Terrell said. "No one can answer that - you can't answer that. You try and do everything right. Bad things can happen. That's just the world we live in. Bad things happen to good people."

"The baby didn't deserve this," Terrell said. "The family didn't deserve this - this family was displaced from another home down here and apparently just moved in with her."

Terrell said both the district attorney and Georgia Bureau of Investigation have said there was no wrongdoing on the SRT's part.

"I've talked to the D.A., I've talked to the GBI," Terrell said. "I've given them the whole information and they say there's nothing else we can do. There's nothing to investigate, there's nothing to look at. Given the information given, GBI's SWAT team would have done the exact same thing - they'd have used the exact same scenario to enter the house."

Terrell said the lack of knowledge that there were children in the home contributed to the situation.

"It's an accident that we would have avoided if we'd just had any inclination that there had a been a child in that house," Terrell said. "We had no idea."

Terrell said officers learned later the children were kept hidden and out of sight in the home.

"Even talking with the mother afterward, they knew that there was some things going on in the house and they tried to keep the children separated from and hid from the occupants of the house because they knew that they were - from what she told the agents, they knew they were selling drugs, so they tried to keep the children separated from that," Terrell said.

While Terrell said the sheriff's office takes ownership of its decision to enter the home, that was necessitated by the man who was selling drugs there.

"The person I blame in this whole thing is the person selling the drugs," Terrell said. "Wanis Thonetheva, that's the person I blame in all this. They are no better than a domestic terrorist, because they don't care about families - they didn't care about the family, the children living in that household - to be selling dope out of it, to be selling methamphetamine out of it. All they care about is making money."

"They don't care about what it does to families," Terrell said. "It's domestic terrorism and I think we should treat them as such. I don't know where we can go with that, but that's my feelings on it. It just makes me so angry! I get so mad that they don't care about what they do, they don't care about the families or the people they're selling to."

The child, born in October 2012, suffered burns to his right side. The pillow the child was lying on was burned, and the device created a hole in the plastic side of the Pack N Play.

"I don't think they cover a significant amount of the face or the chest, that's the two areas, but there are some areas that they're doing surgery on," Terrell said. "I believe they're going to be doing some skin grafts."

Terrell and his officers are taking the incident hard.

"It's heart-wrenching," Terrell said. "Our prayers and our thoughts go out to the family. Yesterday was a grieving day - it was a grieving day for all of us. We didn't do a press

release on it yesterday, because I just don't know that I could have done a press release on it yesterday. I couldn't talk about the scenario without crying - just grieving for that child and grieving for that family."

Terrell said the officer who threw the device "is basically upside down. He's gone and talked to his pastor, trying to get some counseling and some debriefing just to help him get through what has happened."

But even with this tragic event, Terrell said his officers will continue to perform their duties.

"We can't stop," Terrell said. "We're called for a purpose. The members of this team want to be here."

Likewise, SRT members are committed to their duties.

"Our team leader, Matt Wurtz, told me this yesterday - we talked several times - in the trembling of his voice, he said he started working with a dog, he started working in dope, and he wanted to start this team because children are getting involved in situations they don't need to be," Terrell said. "We're getting more and more information about children, 14-15 years of age, getting into methamphetamine. Who is going to stand up for them? Who is going to do the right thing? We are! We are! And we are not going to stop what we do."

Terrell said officers must continue to enforce the law.

"We hate that this happened," Terrell said. "This tears our soul out, but we cannot stop standing up and being the thin blue line against those who don't care about, who want to do the domestic terrorism and sell dope and make the money. We're still going to stand between them and still do our job - we've got to."