

OpTac International News Bulletin

Hostage Rescue or Casualty Reduction

The recent attack and subsequent hostage-taking in Orlando, Florida brings the subject of response to high-risk tactical operations to the forefront of every law enforcement agency in the country. This edition of the OpTac International News Bulletin asks the question: Is there a difference between hostage rescue and casualty reduction when a SWAT team is called to perform its life-saving mission?

Current estimates for the Orlando Incident reflect 49 people dead and at least 53 more injured in what is now the deadliest shooting rampage in U.S. history. Additionally, one SWAT officer was shot in the head, but survived, due to the round impacting his kevlar helmet. OpTac International developed a model, which links factors for the determination of critical incident outcomes.

There is an inextricable link between leader skills, team performance, organizational conditions, and suspect actions as determining factors for successful outcomes on high-risk tactical operations and critical incidents. Law enforcement agencies must recognize that they may only be able to react to and restrict some suspect actions. Many suspect actions, such as what initially occurred in the Orlando Incident, are out of the control of SWAT team members and critical incident managers. As a result, the suspect was able to inflict high casualty totals in Orlando before being killed by SWAT personnel.

The rescue of hostages, whether through negotiation, extraction, or by immediately engaging a suspect, is paramount---this is a SWAT team's primary function. However, a tactical team cannot "fix" a situation in which a suspect is actively engaging hostages. Once the shooting starts, hostage rescue then becomes casualty reduction with the goal of limiting the number of hostages killed. A casualty reduction operation is much more difficult than hostage rescue because the shooting has already started and the element of surprise is lost. The key is adequate preparation before an incident occurs, and then taking quick and decisive action as it unfolds.

Adequate preparation means preparing at the highest levels through optimal pre-incident organizational conditions, and not, by merely meeting minimum standards. Quite often, hostages are shot and/or killed by responding tactical teams. One of several such incidents occurred in Sydney, Australia (2014) in which one hostage was killed and three others along with a SWAT officer were injured, all by police bullets. Police officers are accountable for every round fired and must achieve positive target identification before firing, even under the extraordinarily difficult circumstances present in high-risk tactical operations.

Recognizing that suspects play a role in determining the outcome of critical incidents allows for a more effective police response. This dynamic defines whether the mission is hostage rescue or becomes casualty reduction. In either situation a tactical team must be prepared to respond quickly, decisively, and with minimal margin for error; otherwise, lives will be lost.

Agency heads should ask themselves: In a perfect world, would I prepare my team differently if I knew that I could have prevented law enforcement personnel and/or hostages from dying on a future operation? If the answer is yes, then the cost-cutting measures currently in place will reflect the price of the lives lost.