

Practical Active Shooter Intervention Tactics

By Jason Wuestenberg

After the Columbine High School tragedy, the public demanded that first responders act when loss of life is evident and in progress. This resulted in the creation of active shooter intervention tactics. Agencies from across the nation were calling each other to find out what the other was teaching. Law enforcement organizations, as well as the private sector, jumped on board and started offering courses to get the law enforcement community up to speed.

The most predominate tactic being taught was, and to my knowledge still is, the Diamond formation or "T" formation. At the time of inception this appeared to be a good solution. It was relatively easy to teach and it promoted team work and unity. This was the first time an "offensive" posture was being taught to first responders. The diamond and "T" formation was a good way to control that.

What I discovered over time, during force-on-force training, was the tactics had many flaws and disadvantages. Here the major problems with the Diamond and "T" formations:

- The team movement was too slow against a fast moving suspect because the formations require a dedicated rear guard facing backwards. You're only as fast as your slowest man.
- The team projected itself as one large target (three people wide) to the suspect, which means the suspect did not have to be a good marksman to get a hit on one or more team members.
- The formations never held up to an engagement with a suspect because everyone wanted to get out of the line of fire. . . and rightfully so!
- Most fleeing victims travel down the center of a hallway or corridor, which is where the Diamond and "T" formation travels. This means the formation blocks the path of fleeing victims and the victims block the team and prevent them from reaching the suspect faster.
- Everyone in the team was assigned an area of responsibility during movement (point, right guard, left guard, rear guard, etc). If one person doesn't check or cover a threat area, the entire team is put at risk because no one else checked the missed threat area either.





- The formations make the right and left guards vulnerable to opposite angles when approaching hallway intersections or corners.
- The formations do not work on stairwells, no matter how wide they are, when you have to get to another floor to find the suspect.

I wasn't the only one on our department that saw the flaws of these tactics. After being assigned to our Tactical Training Unit in 2005, three other officers and I were tasked with revising the program. Knowing that the majority of law enforcement agencies and organizations were still teaching these tactics, we decided to get a military perspective on team tactics for a fast pace, dynamic environment involving both close-quarters and open areas.

We invited a former military spec-ops operator, who had also done multiple operations overseas as a contract specialist, to conduct team tactics and hostage rescue training for our instructor staff in hopes that we would pick up on some principles or philosophies that we could adapt. Although we could not use everything presented in the course, we were able to identify several principles and tactics that we could adapt to our policies and procedures. Some of them were the same basic tactics I learned when I was in the military. The result was a total revision of our active shooter intervention program. We rebuilt the program from the ground up.

After working out all the little bugs, we decided to test the new tactics. In a trial session, we trained approx. 40 officers in an 8-hour training session at a high school, which included simple drills to understand the new principle-based tactics and a scenario in which they had to track down and engage a suspect. Victim rescues were not covered in this training session. At the end of the session, the officers were asked about the practicality of the new program. The response was overwhelming. Officers stated that the new program was easier to learn, easier to put into action, quicker to track down suspects, and more effective against suspects upon contact.

The Revised Program

Because the program is such a major change from the traditional tactics, it is not practical to address every change in this article. So, I will give a brief overview.

The new program only requires three officers to deploy (it can be done with two, but it's harder). It is much faster in terms of movement to contact. It presents two smaller targets to the suspect instead of one large target, promotes triangulation (dividing the suspect attention), and is totally flexible in design. There are no rigid team formations. The tactics are principle-based, which means they can be changed or modified as the environment or situation dictates.

The Active Shooter Intervention (ASI) team, can have anywhere from three to four officers on it. You can have more, but chances are that if you have three officers, you won't wait for more; especially once you realize that three officers are faster, and equally as effective, as five or six officers. The ASI team is broken down into two "cells". These cells are separated, but work together to accomplish the same goal. The cells are always within audible and visual range of each other. The number of officers in each cell is irrelevant, and can vary. If you have a 3-officer team, then it would be a 2-man cell and a 1-man cell. If you have a 4-man team, then it could be two 2-man cells, or a 3-man cell and a 1-man cell.



The idea behind having two cells is to present a "two-front war" against a suspect, also known as "triangulation". This is similar to "Contact & Cover" or "L shape" position, but much more flexible. The suspect can not engage both cells simultaneously. This can divide the suspect's attention and put them under duress. The two cells move in two separate "loose-stack" formations. This allows for increased speed of movement, ability to maintain individual shooting platforms during movement, and any cross angles

encountered are covered better. We don't promote a "tight stack" that is commonly used by SWAT teams. They have some disadvantages, such as the point man's inability to step back or disengage when needed, physical contact from one team member interfering with the shooting platform of another team member, and decrease in the speed of the team's movement. Our "loose stack" formation means the team members are about 1 - 2 arm lengths away from each other. Close enough to lunge forward and grab your team member if needed, yet separated enough so that they don't hinder each other's movement and shooting platform.

The dedicated rear guard has been eliminated and rear safety is now everyone's responsibility. In other words, everyone's head is on a swivel. Check the rear any chance you get. Combine this with the speed of the team's movement and you realize that the ability for someone to ambush you from behind is diminished. You're not using a "dedicated" rear guard so that your team can move faster. I think that is reasonable, and so did the officers that have participated in the training.

Movement through open areas, such as parking lots and common areas between buildings, can be negotiated using the basic bounding technique taught in the military. Although this is slower than free-flowing dynamic movement, bounding would be used when the team is taking fire or in close proximity to the suspect and still needs to advance. It is basically moving forward while utilizing cover or concealment. One cell posts behind cover/concealment and provides protection as the other cell moves forward to cover/concealment. Once the moving cell has posted behind cover/concealment, then the other cell can move forward. This “leap frog” tactic continues as needed, or as the environment dictates. This can also be used in a hallway to increase safety as you close in on a suspect. There are some other principles and technical aspects to keep in mind while doing this tactic, but again, this is a just a general overview.



Room entries are now principle-based tactics instead of technique-driven tactics. If you are entering a room you believe to have an armed suspect, then the entire ASI team is entering the room. The idea behind this is that you want to maximize your firepower against an armed suspect. If one of the first two officers in the room has a weapon malfunction, or gets injured, then the third (and fourth for a 4-man team) officer is already in the room to continue the “two-front war” against the suspect. Some officers may say that the hallway needs to be covered. I don’t know a single officer that will stay out in the hall while the rest of the team is in the fight for their lives in the room. Everyone on the team will go in. The hallway is not the primary threat, the suspect in the room killing innocent people is. Solve the problem in the room first, and then worry about the hallway.

I’m not going to get into the specifics of our room entry tactics because that can be a separate article in itself. But, I will tell you this. We are not teaching “crisscross” and “buttonhook” techniques because they will fail against a dedicated armed suspect who is focused on the doorway. Our room entry method is principle-based and has a greater chance of survival than any other technique I have

seen. And, we have tested it in force-on-force training. Our principles are simply this: clear as much of the room from the outside prior to entry and try to solve the problem from outside. If you unable to locate the suspect, and you have to enter the room, then burst through the doorway (traveling the path you can see from outside the room) and be a hard target for the suspect to hit via movement as you clear the remaining portion of the room (deep corner, 10% area, etc). The first officer in the room is trying to dodge bullets. The suspect will naturally try to track the first officer, which in turn draws fire away from the doorway and making it safer for the rest of the team as they enter. The second officer in the room moves in a manner to form triangulation (two-front war) on the suspect. The remaining officers fill in accordingly. Those are the core principles for our room entry. And, it works very well. Limited entries (head and weapon only) are also a viable option.

Once the suspect goes down, one officer in the room immediately turns around and covers the door to ensure no one ambushes them from behind, in case there are multiple suspects. It is easier to watch a single doorway from inside the room than to be posted outside the room and watching several threat areas simultaneously. The hallway will need to be cleared again before you re-enter it, but that can easily be done.



We have also eliminated the use of Rescue Teams, which were used to conduct the evacuation of victims who were in lock down locations. The problem with having a 4 or 5-man team conducting rescues is that it may not be enough officers. This would depend on if there are any injured victims that need to be carried out and the how long the route is to the

“safe area”. Many officers may be needed along the route to direct evacuating victims to safety, just like what was seen during the aerial news footage of the Columbine incident. So, the only criteria we have for conducting rescues is that there must be a dedicated 3-man security team posted at each rescue location to provide security for the rescue. The number of officers needed to conduct the actual rescue will vary. If another suspect presents himself during a rescue, then the security team immediately becomes an ASI team and confronts the suspect.

Another problem that I have seen with the traditional active shooter programs is that it is always associated with schools. The reality is that an active shooter can occur anywhere. A shopping mall, an office complex, a sporting event, and even in a neighborhood. The principles and tactics need to be adaptable to any environment and easy to put into action. We have conducted this training at high schools, sporting arenas, concert halls, city hall, water treatment facility, and a corporate business facility. The vast majority of these places were multi-level. In many



of our scenarios, officers had to start from a parking lot or common area outside the building and track down and confront an armed suspect on the second or third floor of the building. In most cases, it was accomplished within 5 minutes. That is impressive, and couldn't be done using a Diamond or "T" formation.

Conclusion

Our nation has had four major active shooter events that have made national news in the last fourteen months. The Utah mall shooting in February 2007; the Virginia Tech shooting in April 2007; the Omaha mall shooting in December 2007; and most recently, the shooting at Northern Illinois University in February 2008. There have been many more that have not made the news. These types of crimes will not subside.

This is the new program we have on our department (Phoenix Police Dept.). The program is 8-hours. We trained all of the first responders on our department (approx. 1000+ patrol officers) in about 6 months. The training was well-received, and many officers stated that it was the most practical training and tactics our department has ever taught; probably because the principles in this program can be used for other high risk situations as well. We, the trainers, think it is a practical intervention method for first responders that utilize principles as its foundation instead of step-by-step tactics and rigid formations. Other surrounding agencies have adopted this program.



Through my company, I have extended my department's 8-hour program into a 2-day course that includes live-fire and force-on-force training so that other agencies can be exposed to this program. The course is AZ POST approved for 16 hours of training credit.

I'm sure there are other tactics and philosophies out there in regards to active shooter intervention. And, by no means do I claim that our revised program is the best. Your agency's active shooter tactics should be simple by design, flexible, easy to implement, and effective against a fast moving and unpredictable suspect. If it is...great! If it isn't, then you may want to consider revising your program. Train hard and stay safe!