



Suicide By Cop: Averting the Crisis



2008 Symposium Agenda December 7 – 9, 2008

OPENING REMARKS, Robert Blecksmith – Assistant Director for the Critical Incident Response Group, FBI

I. Introduction -

Good evening and thank you Dave for that introduction. I must admit, that when I joined the FBI nearly 24 years ago and Ed Meese was my Attorney General, I never envisioned the likelihood or opportunity to be involved in such a setting with the present company. I am so pleased to be here tonight at the inception of this very important conference and I look forward to hearing about and seeing the forthcoming results based on the dialogue, interaction and discussions over the next few days.

On a daily basis I have the distinct privilege of working with some of the finest people in the FBI who comprise the Critical Incident Response Group, or CIRG. The focus of this conference, "Suicide by Cop" or SBC, is an issue of intense interest to the FBI as a whole, and more specifically to CIRG. First off, many of you may not be aware that the FBI serves as the central clearinghouse for all law enforcement fatalities, including those which may involve officers in a SBC situation. But the issue is also one of extreme relevance to CIRG, as the potential for SBC is one of the paramount issues to be evaluated in the very types of critical incident situations which led to the creation of CIRG.

Quite frankly, SBC is also one of the issues that keeps many law enforcement managers awake at night, as everyday they must prepare for the possibility of facing an adversary that not only isn't afraid to die, but may in fact have a death wish. These types of scenarios can present themselves in many forms, including national level high impact situations ranging from a Columbine or Virginia Tech style school or University shooting...to 9/11 or other large scale act of Terrorism...to the more common, localized issues often involving the escalation of a domestic dispute into a hostage/barricade situation.



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We are often times dealing with an adversary that manifests the worst of the human condition... unstable, desperate individuals who have perhaps reached a breaking point in their lives. The most critical overarching aspect of our mission at CIRG relates to ensuring the safety not only of the citizenry we serve, but the law enforcement and first responder personnel whom we support, as well as our own personnel. I believe that it is also important to emphasize that we are extremely mindful of the FBI's core value of compassion, and we make every effort to wield our law enforcement powers with restraint and apply the minimal force necessary to successfully resolve a situation and thwart our adversary. This is another reason why an in-depth study of the SBC issue is so important to me as the leader of CIRG, as we want to have a greater understanding for the risks we face, in order for our leadership component to be able to make prudent decisions in these critical situations.



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II. History of CIRG and interaction with CIAG.

Let me just briefly touch upon the impetus for the creation of CIRG, and try to give you an appreciation for the nature of the service we provide. The events at Ruby Ridge and WACO in 1992 and 1993, respectively, were to have a major impact on FBI policies and operations, and would set the stage for public and congressional inquiries into the FBI's methodology and ability to respond to crisis situations.

The Deputy Attorney General at that time, Phillip B. Heymann issued a report on October 8, 1993, entitled "Lessons of Waco: Proposed Changes in Federal Law Enforcement." This report summarized the recommendations of a panel of ten law enforcement experts regarding federal law enforcement's ability to handle complex hostage/barricade situations, and in particular, those on a large scale involving an unusually large number of well-armed individuals, and possibly multiple hostages or unwitting conspirators as well. In fact, the first terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center had just recently occurred, and the DAG revealed great insight in noting the need to take stock of our resources in anticipation of similar attacks in the future.

The Heymann report called for the integration and co-location of the FBI's Crises Negotiation, Crises Management, Behavioral Sciences, and Tactical Assets (to include the Hostage Rescue Team). As a result, a unique hybrid division was subsequently created on May 17, 1994, when Director Louie Freeh notified the Attorney General of the formation of the Critical Incident Response Group (CIRG), which was to be headed by a Special Agent in Charge. CIRG's mission was defined as the ability to "address crisis situations requiring an emergency response by a diverse group of law enforcement resources." CIRG would facilitate the FBI's rapid response to, and management of, crisis incidents. It was established to integrate tactical and investigative resource expertise to address terrorist activities, hostage taking, barricaded subjects, and other critical incidents that require immediate law enforcement response. CIRG is also capable of deploying investigative specialists to respond to child abduction and exploitation, serial murder, and other high-risk repetitive crimes. In addition, CIRG



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provides operational assistance and training to the FBI's field divisions, as well as to state and local police agencies.

The Heymann report also called upon the FBI to broaden its pool of behavioral science experts who would be available to consult with federal law enforcement officials in crisis situations. As you are likely aware, this ultimately led to the formation of CIAG and was the genesis for such fine programs as we will be enjoying over these next few days. On a regular basis, I am informed of the tremendous contributions that CIAG, and in particular, Dr. Saathoff makes to our operational, training, and research endeavors.

In short, the concept and basis that led to the creation of CIRG in 1994 has remained intact over the years and is the foundation for a division that now has over 500 Special Agents and professional support employees. Since its inception, CIRG's responsibilities have substantially increased, especially in light of events of 9/11. In addition to its original mandate - crisis management, negotiations, tactical and behavioral - CIRG now is responsible for managing most of the FBI's response programs. These include: aviation, physical surveillance, Special Agent Bomb Technicians and the training of all bomb techs in the US who assigned to accredited bomb squads, special events management, and the response to, mitigation, and if necessary, rendering safe of all Weapons of Mass Destruction devices in the US. Our motto in CIRG is "Anytime, Anywhere" and our vision is "Readiness, Response and Resolution." CIRG truly has become the FBI's response toolbox.

Now let me discuss a few of those CIRG elements that are particularly relevant when considering the SBC issue:



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III. CNU & HRT

The mission of the FBI's Crisis Negotiation Unit (CNU) is to disrupt, prevent and defeat terrorist and criminal related hostage takings against American interests, both domestically and internationally, by maintaining a national level tactical negotiation capability. CNU also provides basic negotiation training to all FBI negotiators, as well as to other Federal, state, local, tribal and international law enforcement partners.

CNU deploys on hostage and kidnap matters overseas involving United States Citizens and manages FBI negotiation assets at the scene, while also providing U.S. Ambassadors and FBI Legal Attaches with assessments and strategies during hostage and kidnap situations.

Significant to the SBC issue, CNU manages the FBI's Law Enforcement Negotiation Support site on LEO, or Law Enforcement On-Line, as well as the Hostage Barricade Database System (HOBAS). HOBAS serves as the central database for the collection of information pertaining to all hostage barricade situations, the overwhelming majority of which are handled by state and local law enforcement agencies. Of the approximately 5400 incidents captured in HOBAS, 55 (or about 1%) involved an SBC scenario. Of course, as will be discussed this week, the definition of SBC has been somewhat tenuous and not applied uniformly, and I would suspect that there may be a degree of under reporting. Of those 55 incidents involving an SBC issue, 46 concluded with the subject being killed. And while 6 of these situations led to police officers being injured, only one of the incidents resulted in the death of a police officer.

HRT - Our crises negotiators also deploy with our Hostage Rescue Team as their crises negotiation element. Let me tell you a little more about our HRT and how their mission has evolved in response to changing world circumstances. In 1982, in preparation for the 1984 Olympics in LA, the DOJ decided to create a special counter-terrorist unit within Federal law enforcement to offer a tactical option for any extraordinary hostage



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crisis occurring within the US and thereby avoid the need for a military response. The decision was made to create this unit within the FBI and the Attorney General authorized the formation of the HRT, comprised of carefully selected and highly motivated Special Agents. After several months of intensive training and the procurement of the necessary specialized equipment, HRT was activated in 1983 and assigned to the FBI's Washington Field Office. The team was originally allocated 50 Agent positions.

Today, as part of CIRG and located at the FBI Academy in Quantico, the team has grown just as its mission and responsibilities have increased. The HRT is structured to deploy with part, or all of its personnel and resources, depending upon the magnitude of a crisis, and whether or not they are augmented by those other CIRG entities with specialists trained in areas of negotiation, behavioral science, and communications.

The HRT has enhanced manpower, training, and resources to confront the most complex of threats. The HRT deploys operationally in support of FBI field divisions, and performs a number of law enforcement tactical functions, in all environments and under a variety of conditions. Over its 25 year history, the HRT, or components of the team, have deployed on over 625 occasions in support of FBI counterterrorism, violent criminal, foreign counter-intelligence, and other investigations.

HRT has performed missions involving hostage rescue, barricaded subjects, high-risk arrests, undercover and surveillance operations - as well as less traditional law enforcement roles during hurricane relief operations, dignitary protection missions, and in support of FBI investigations overseas. As part of the FBI's contribution to the Global War on Terror, HRT elements have continuously been deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries to provide force protection to FBI personnel, and to conduct sensitive site exploitations and intelligence gathering activities.



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IV. NCAVC The National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) is the CIRG component responsible for behavioral assessments in crisis situations. NCAVC is divided into three Behavioral Analysis Units, as well as the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program or ViCAP. In addition to its operational mission, this year alone the NCAVC has provided specialized training to over 1,800 members of Federal, state, local and international agencies, as well as conducting presentations for over 25,000 participants. Specifically relevant to our topic at hand, Behavioral Analysis Unit 1 (BAU-1) is routinely called upon to evaluate persons who exhibit disturbing behavior, which may include suicidal tendencies. They are often asked to evaluate a person's risk of violence and develop strategies to help minimize the probability that the individual will cause harm to themselves or to others. In fact, the CIRG mission enables Agents from the BAU-1 to work side by side with their CNU counterparts during crises situations in which an evaluation of the subject's likelihood to commit lethal violence against self or others is a critical element of the overall intervention strategy.

Sometimes, the suicidal person selfishly involves innocent students at schools and universities, shoppers at malls, people at churches, or colleagues in the workplace. The offender's need to externalize blame propels their despair outward, and their need to be recognized as powerful, controlling warriors drives them to find a stage upon which to act out their final attack.

Suicide by cop is one way that an offender can find a stage, simultaneously casting an officer as both victim and audience member. By setting off a chain of events that logically and predictably results in the use of deadly force, the offender seeks to control and manipulate the way in which he will be remembered. By provoking first responders into using deadly force, the offender hopes to look like a warrior who valiantly goes out in a hail of gunfire.

Some have used the term, "suicide in front of cop" which is a phenomenon that we have encountered in some school and university shootings. The offender may



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wait until police arrive to kill him, a final act that may, in the offender's mind, demonstrate power over law enforcement officers who are unable to stop the suicide from occurring. Or, perhaps more likely, the offender has carefully scripted out a plan as to how the attack will unfold and end. Rather than risk being arrested alive, the attacker decides to commit suicide as the police are rushing in the door. Colorado, Virginia, and Illinois have all recently experienced horrific incidents that would have been worse were it not for the professional and prompt responses of law enforcement first responders.

Currently, the BAU-1 is vigorously engaged in several research initiatives in the area of Targeted Violence, with one of the objectives being the identification of commonalities among individuals who intentionally choose to commit suicide (and/or SBC) as the culmination of the homicidal act. This research spans a realm from criminal events such as school and public place mass shootings, to acts of terrorism.

Integrated Case Example:

One of the recent, notable cases which comes to mind in which the evaluation for the potential for SBC was critical to the outcome, and in which the aforementioned CIRG components worked hand-in-hand, was the 2006 manhunt for FBI Top Ten fugitive **Ralph "Bucky" Phillips**, who had shot 3 NY State Troopers, one fatally, after escaping from a NY jail.

By way of background, on April 2, 2006, Bucky Phillips escaped from the Erie County Correctional Facility in Alden, New York. Phillips had been incarcerated on a minor parole violation and ironically was scheduled to be released within a few weeks. Phillips escaped by prying open a roof vent in the kitchen area of the prison.

On June 10, 2006, at approximately 1:00 AM, a New York State Police Trooper was shot and wounded during a traffic stop in a remote area near the city of Elmira, New York. The Trooper and his partner had stopped a green Ford Mustang. As the Trooper approached the stopped Mustang, several shots were fired from the vehicle without warning. The Trooper was struck in the abdomen, but recovered from the wound. Evidence found in the vehicle identified Phillips as the shooter.



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A massive five-month, multi-state manhunt ensued, primarily focused around Central and Western New York State. Phillips subsequently committed more than 20 burglaries of homes and cabins throughout Western New York, as well as stealing at least 15 vehicles. Phillips also traveled to Ohio and Kentucky during this period.

Phillips was a very adept and resourceful burglar and auto thief, and was capable of moving about easily despite the massive deployment of law enforcement officers and the establishment of roadblocks throughout the area. Phillips received significant assistance from friends and relatives, as well as moral support from many in the local community, attaining almost a “folk hero” status.

On August 24, 2006, the NY State Police arrested Bucky Phillips' girlfriend, his daughter, and her boyfriend in Western NY in connection with their efforts to aid Phillips. Shortly after these arrests, the NY State Police released information indicating that Phillips had made threats against New York State Troopers. During that following weekend, Phillips burglarized a nearby gun shop, stealing 41 weapons including 35 handguns.

Less than one week later, on August 31, 2006, Phillips ambushed 2 New York State Troopers who were on duty at an observation post in the vicinity of the home occupied by Phillips' daughter, shooting them both sniper style. As a result of the shooting, one of the Troopers died and the other was seriously wounded.

The NY State Police had obtained several letters written by Phillips, and were also aware of statements he had made to family and supporters which indicated that he would not be taken alive. The NYSP were of the opinion that the most likely conclusion to this situation would be a shoot out and suicide by cop scenario.

The FBI provided immediate assistance with the deployment of HRT and the use of CIRG aviation assets. The Crises Negotiation Unit also responded on scene to provide strategies for communicating not only with Phillips, but also with his friends, family, and other supporters. CNU worked together with BAU to review all available



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case file materials and offer an assessment as to Phillips most likely reaction to being confronted by law enforcement at the time of his eventual capture.

In fact, it was the ultimate opinion of CNU and BAU that while Phillips was likely to take advantage of future opportunities in which he could shoot police officers ambush style and thereafter escape the area, that it was very unlikely he would commit to a final shoot-out or SBC ending. This opinion guided the tactical response of the HRT and the SWAT teams they supported, and proved accurate when a surrounded and fatigued Phillips ultimately surrendered without a fight.

V. Wrap up and looking forward

This conference serves as a wonderful opportunity to not only look in the rear view mirror at past events and develop lessons-learned, but to look over the horizon as we examine an issue as important as SBC. Our country faces the prospect of thousands of physically injured and psychologically fatigued veterans returning to the home front at a time when their adjustment to civilian life will be strained by a difficult economy. These are certainly significant risk factors for an increase in violent confrontation with paramours and law enforcement. In fact, our Crisis Negotiations Unit will be conducting a one week basic course for Armed Forces at the Marine Corps Base at Quantico next month, in response to the rise in crisis situations on military reservations. Questions asked might include:



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- I. Will these conditions become a recipe for an increase in SBC situations?
- II. What will be the near-term and long-term effects?
- III. What strategies can be developed to better address SBC circumstances?

It is my belief that these and many other questions will be discussed and answered over the next few days with the gathering of so many talented and committed individuals present at this conference. I thank CIAG for its continued effort to seek and find resolution to so many of the difficult issues facing our country. Thank you.