Police Practice

Riot Response: An Innovative Approach

By Ken Hubbs

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Over the centuries, organized societies often have spawned violent civil disturbances. Countless civil uprisings have been motivated by personal, religious, or political purposes, and many have prompted significant societal changes. Recent decades witnessed race riots across the United States in the 1960s, protests over American involvement in Vietnam in the 1970s, abortion clinic demonstrations in the 1980s, and disturbances stemming from allegations of police brutality in the 1990s. The assorted techniques used by modern law enforcement to quell civil disturbances have been used for many years with varying degrees of effectiveness.

After any significant civil disturbance in which large-scale property damage, loss of life, or both occur, law enforcement agencies are held accountable. Often, departments face a catch-22 situation: rapid and aggressive police action garners allegations of overreacting, whereas a limited police response in hopes that the incident will calm down on its own brings accusations of incompetence. Clearly, the police need new strategies for dealing with civil disturbances. As the city of Los Angeles was burning in the wake of the Rodney King verdicts, members of the San Diego, California, Police Department SWAT Special Response Team began developing new methods of extinguishing the violent behavior of an unruly populace. They eventually adopted two techniques—the Augmented Skirmish Line and the Tango Team. These offer law enforcement agencies innovative ways to quell such disturbances.

The Augmented Skirmish Line

Generally, when a civil disturbance erupts, uniformed officers prepare themselves by donning helmets with face shields and carrying riot batons. The officers quickly assemble into one of several formations designed to show police presence and/or deny the crowd access to specific areas.

The most common formation is the standard skirmish line. This formation quickly and effectively differentiates the crowd from the police. The skirmish line usually consists of a line of officers with hats and bats, several line backers, and a leader. Once the skirmish line is in place, the police give a dispersal order, commanding the members of the unlawful group to leave the area.

A significant weakness of the standard skirmish line concept is the span of control. With 20 to 40 or more officers deployed in the formation, it is inconceivable that only 1 leader, even assisted by the line backers, can maintain control of the line of officers during a conflict. The augmented skirmish line provides a method of deploying officers in a riot squad formation, while maintaining satisfactory control of the personnel involved. It divides the entire group of officers into smaller element groups, each with an element leader. The overall, or "Alpha," leader can make decisions and give directions to the element leaders (designated "Bravo," "Charlie," etc.), thus limiting the span of control. With improved command and control of the skirmish line and, therefore, the conflict, the police improve the odds of resolving the incident successfully.
Crowd Dynamics

Frequently, unruly groups contain only a handful of aggressive or violent members. The majority are onlookers who just want to be part of the event. Therefore, the presence of uniformed law enforcement officers formed into the skirmish line and outfitted with helmets and riot batons usually has an intimidating effect on the crowd.

In most cases, this effect lasts about 2 minutes, then some members of the crowd become vocal in an attempt to provoke an altercation. As time passes without action from either side, a small faction within the crowd might begin to search for objects to throw at the officers maintaining the skirmish line. This is especially true if the officers are carrying shields.

Essentially, absent other activity between the crowd and the skirmish line, the shields become missile magnets, inviting the crowd to start throwing things. Unfortunately, the police often have no contingency plans for responding to a rain of rocks and bottles. In the absence of other procedures, the leader commands the line to charge, batons start flying, and the police completely lose control of the incident. The Tango Team provides an alternative, allowing every use-of-force decision to be controlled and planned.

The Tango Team

Tango stands for Tactically Aggressive and Necessary Gambit of Options. This team goes forward and "dances" with the crowd. The Tango Team can bring to bear the entire spectrum of use-of-force options—from command presence through deadly force—in a controlled, self-contained package.

This unit of special weapons team members can be mobilized to support riot response teams in the event of violent activity by angry crowds. Using extended range weapons (e.g., rubber bullets and beanbag ammunition), the Tango Team can strike selected targets in the crowd from beyond rock and bottle receiving range. This not only deters the crowd but also helps protect officers from injury.

The San Diego Police Department’s Tango Team consists of eight members:

- -- Team leader
- -- Point officer armed with a Sage SL-6 37mm launcher loaded with baton rounds
- -- Two officers armed with shotguns loaded with 12 gauge beanbag munitions and carrying bandoleers of additional rounds
- -- Two shield handlers, each with a shield and a large (46 ounces) cannister of aerosol agents (CN, CS, or OC)
- -- Two riflemen armed with submachine guns set on semi-automatic firing mode.

The Tango Team can remain out of sight of the crowd, behind the skirmish line, until it is deployed. After deciding to use force to resolve the situation, perhaps because of escalating violence toward the police, the incident commander authorizes the Tango leader to deploy the team. The center of the skirmish line opens, and the Tango Team marches through the gap toward the crowd. The psychological effect of seeing this aggressive police action might in itself cause some members of the crowd to realize that they should leave.

On the Tango leader's command, the team breaks into a wedge formation. The Tango leader, in the center of the wedge, communicates with each member of the team through tactical communication equipment, including throat microphones and custom-molded ear pieces. The point officer takes up the
apex position. The shotgun operators position themselves on each side, one step back and two steps out. The shield handlers take their places behind and outside of the shotgun operators, followed by the riflemen, stationed behind and outside the shield handlers. The point officer identifies individual targets, such as rock throwers, instigators, or others, as directed by the Tango leader. Using the SL-6 launcher, the point officer can strike with accuracy targets with accuracy as far as 100 meters away.

The shotgun operators, have the same responsibility as the point officer, only at closer range. They can accurately strike targets within 20 meters.

The shield handlers are responsible for alerting the rest of the team of incoming projectiles and deflecting objects away from team members. They also carry large aerosol chemical agent dispensers. Chemical agents can be used to create distance between the skirmish line and the crowd and can be deployed effectively by the shield handlers without contaminating unnecessary areas.

Should the team receive gunfire from adjacent buildings or other areas, the riflemen can return fire accurately. They provide the team's deadly force option.

Appropriate Levels of Force

In the San Diego format, the Tango Team leader selects from four levels of force. The choice always depends on the actions of the crowd.

In a level-one deployment, once the Tango Team has formed in front of the skirmish line, the Tango leader can use a bullhorn to advise the crowd to leave. The leader can escalate the team's response based on the crowd's behavior. With a level-four deployment, the team uses sound/flash diversionary devices (flashbangs) to gain the attention of the crowd, while aggressively advancing on the crowd and firing baton rounds and bean bags.

Conclusion

In many circumstances, law enforcement agencies have been inadequately prepared to deal with violent civil disturbances. Sometimes, this lack of options has led to overreaction on the part of the police and, at other times, to underreaction. The Augmented Skirmish Line and the Tango Team add two choices to the range of options available for handling violent outbreaks.

In an ideal world, no police commander would ever be faced with another bloody riot, but the lessons of history do not predict such a peaceful future. Fortunately, as the San Diego Police Department has shown, law enforcement can learn from the past and continue to seek safe and effective measures for quelling violent civil disturbances.