March 1999
Volume 68
Number 3

Features

Fighting Terrorism in the 21st Century
By John F. Lewis, Jr.

Confronting Terrorism on the State and Local Level
By D. Douglas Bodrero

The Joint Terrorism Task Force
By Robert A. Martin

Departments

1 Director’s Message

19 Focus on Counterterrorism
Critical Incident Management in the Ultimate Crisis

28 Police Practice
Bomb Threat: A Primer for the First Responder

Members of the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) Committee on Terrorism prepared articles for this issue. The Committee was created in 1986 to counter the international terrorist threat through cooperative police activities. Members of the Committee on Terrorism represent a variety of local, state, and federal agencies and departments, both civilian and military, from the United States and abroad.
On February 23, 1997, a 70-year-old Palestinian visited the observation deck of the Empire State Building. Shortly after arriving, he opened fire with a handgun that he had legally purchased just 1 month after arriving in this country. He killed 1 person and wounded 7 others before killing himself. A search of his clothing revealed a long rambling letter that expressed anti-U.S. and anti-Israel sentiments, along with a Florida nondriver’s license identification card and a receipt for the weapon.

Immediately upon receiving notification of this crime, the FBI-New York City Police Department Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) responded. Task force investigators rushed to the scene to assist the local investigators. The task force command center opened, and the numerous agencies that comprise the task force immediately began working to ascertain the shooter’s identity, his origin, and whether he had any ties to organized terrorist groups.

Within hours, the command center had answers to these questions. The FBI dispatched its Legal Attaché in Israel to the Gaza Strip to interview the subject’s family. The FBI and local police in Florida interviewed several people who could help track the subject’s movements while he lived in that state, fulfilling the residency requirements he needed to purchase the weapon. This information, together with the information supplied by the task force command center, allowed investigators to quickly identify the shooter and, more important, determine if the incident was an act of international terrorism.

The task force concluded that the individual seemed mentally unstable, expressed hatred of Israel and the United States, had no connection to any organized international terrorist group, and had
committed the attack alone. The speed with which the JTTF arrived at this conclusion remains a testament to the effectiveness of a joint task force concept. Had the JTTF not been in place, the investigation may have taken days or weeks, rather than hours, to conclude.

**History of the JTTF**

In 1979, the New York City Police Department (NYPD) first used the concept of combining federal and local law enforcement capabilities due to an overwhelming number of bank robberies. Because the concept proved valuable, administrators eventually applied it to the counterterrorism program. Prior to the establishment of the JTTF, an ad hoc task force of local and federal authorities would form to investigate each new terrorist case.

The idea behind the establishment of the JTTF was a simple one. Once established, the task force would remain in place, becoming a close-knit, cohesive unit capable of addressing the complex problems inherent in terrorism investigations.

Originally the JTTF began with 11 members from the NYPD and 11 FBI investigators. Today’s task force, 1 of 16 nationwide, includes more than 140 members representing numerous federal and local agencies, such as the U.S. Marshals Service, the U.S. Department of State’s Diplomatic Security Service, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the New York State Police, the New York/New Jersey Port Authority Police Department, and the U.S. Secret Service.

All agencies participating in the JTTF sign a formal memorandum of understanding that clearly states the task force’s two objectives:

- **Reactive**: to respond to and investigate terrorist incidents or terrorist-related criminal activity; and
- **Proactive**: to investigate domestic and foreign terrorist groups and individuals targeting or operating within the New York metropolitan area for the purpose of detecting, preventing, and prosecuting their criminal activity.

**Integration of Agencies**

The key to the success of the JTTF concept remains the melding of personnel from the various law enforcement agencies into a single focused unit. All members of the JTTF must think and perform as a team.

This concept best uses the individual skills and expertise of each JTTF member. The benefits of this integration are innumerable. NYPD members bring the insight that comes from years of living and working with the people in the city. These members typically have advanced through careers from uniformed precinct patrol to various detective duties before being assigned to the JTTF.

The FBI special agents bring vast investigative experience from assignments all over the world. The FBI Legal Attachés remain of particular benefit to the task force. These special agents, assigned to U.S. embassies throughout the world, provide initial law enforcement information on JTTF international terrorism cases.

Each of the other participating agencies similarly contributes its own resources and areas of expertise to the JTTF. The integration of the many agencies, each bringing its own unique skills and investigative specialties to the task force, makes this unit formidable in combating terrorism.
Despite the obvious benefits of the JTTF, measuring the success and effectiveness of the unit is not always as clear when judged by traditional standards. Law enforcement officers who work on terrorism-related investigations can labor for months without producing the usual results often used to judge the efficiency of a functioning detective squad (e.g., numbers of arrests, cases cleared, cases closed). Supervisors monitoring the productivity of the JTTF initially might not be impressed with the numbers produced, but such numbers can be deceiving. Opinions of the capabilities of the task force changed rapidly and dramatically on a day in February 1993.

The World Trade Center Bombing

On Friday, February 26, 1993, a massive explosion occurred in the public parking garage of the World Trade Center in New York City. As a result of the explosion, 6 persons were killed, and more than 1,000 injured. The site of the blast became one of the largest crime scenes in NYPD history. Estimates showed property damage in excess of one-half billion dollars. The sense of fear and panic in the city was palpable. Indeed, many in law enforcement thought of this investigation as the “case of the century.”

The JTTF stepped into the maelstrom and helped restore calm to the city. Within a month of the blast, the JTTF apprehended four individuals responsible for the attack. The suspects went on trial on September 13, 1993. The trial lasted 6 months with the presentation of 204 witnesses and more than 1,000 pieces of evidence. A jury convicted the four defendants on March 4, 1994, in federal court on all 38 counts against them. On May 25, 1994, a judge sentenced each of the four defendants to 240 years in prison and a $250,000 fine. On February 7, 1995, authorities in Pakistan arrested the prime fugitive wanted in connection with the bombing and subsequently rendered him to U.S. authorities. This suspect, the mastermind behind the bombing, was sentenced to 240 years in prison on January 8, 1998.

The quick action taken by the JTTF did much to allay fears and return a sense of normalcy to New York City. The World Trade Center bombing will be remembered as the gravest attack of international terrorism to occur directly on American soil. As part of the plot to strike at the United States, these international terrorists intended to disrupt the dynamics of daily life, commerce, and finance in one of the most heavily populated cities in the United States. The suspect and his associates had hoped to kill upwards of 35,000 innocent people. The excellent work accomplished by the JTTF in investigating and successfully resolving the case dispelled the sense of vulnerability the terrorists had hoped to instill.

Terrorist Groups

As the World Trade Center case unfolded, investigators uncovered a second, potentially far more deadly plot—a threat posed by a radical Islamic terrorist group. It soon became apparent that this group planned to strike out against the United States, and intended to commit these acts in the New York City area. Investigation by the JTTF revealed that these individuals were making explosive devices and intended to use them on such targets as the Lincoln and Holland tunnels, the United Nations headquarters building, and the federal building that houses the FBI New York Field Office.

On June 23, 1993, JTTF members raided the group’s safe house and found its members making bombs they planned to use during simultaneous attacks on the four targets. As a result of this investigation, the JTTF made 15 arrests between June 24 and August 23, 1993. The arrests prevented the group from carrying out acts of planned terrorism, including murders and bombings. The arrests also increased confidence in the ability of law enforcement, working in concert on the federal, state, and local level, to protect the lives and businesses of the residents of New York City.
Five of the 15 defendants plead-
ed guilty or became government
witnesses. Ten of the defendants
went on trial in federal court on
January 9, 1995. On October 1 of
that year, a jury found all 10 defen-
dants guilty of a total of 25 criminal
charges. On January 17, 1996, the
defendants received sentences
ranging from 35 years to life plus 65
years.

Additional Successes

On July 17, 1996, TWA Flight
800 crashed off the coast of Long
Island, New York, killing all 230
people aboard the plane. Although
ultimately determined not to be an
act of terrorism, initial specula-
tion centered on terrorism as one pos-
sible cause of the crash, and the
safety of U.S. civil aviation was
called into question. The sense of
fear grew among some air travelers.

Once again the JTTF ran the
investigation. From the start, the
FBI and the other members of the
JTTF worked in tandem with the
National Transportation Safety
Board. The FBI handpicked special
agents from terrorism squads to
work on the investigation. Local
law enforcement contributed re-
sources, as well. The JTTF at-
tempts to determine whether a
criminal act brought down TWA
Flight 800.

A 16-month exhaustive investi-
gation followed. In that time period,
investigators from the JTTF con-
ducted more than 7,000 interviews
that spanned from the shores of
Long Island to several foreign coun-
tries. Investigators recovered ap-
proximately 1 million pieces of the
aircraft (about 96 percent of the
plane), which bomb technicians and
laboratory personnel visually in-
spected. All 230 victims were re-
covered and subsequently identi-
fied. Experts performed exhaustive
analysis and explored all avenues of
potential criminality to determine if
a bomb or missile could have
caused the explosion. The JTTF
pursued every lead it found in this
case. In the end, no evidence indi-
cated that a criminal act caused the
incident.

The JTTF concept again proved
its worth. Months of delay in assem-
bling a team and initiating liaison
contacts with federal agencies were
avoided because the mechanisms already existed. The members of the JTTF took great pride in the thoroughness of their investigation and in allaying the fears of the American public that terrorism caused this tragedy.

The year 1997 proved to be a busy one for the JTTF, providing new examples of the benefits the task force concept brings to investigations. In addition to the Empire State Building shooting, the year witnessed a terrorist threat in New York from an unconventional weapon. In March 1997, the suspect of a mail-order fraud case invited the investigating detectives into his residence. The cluttered house contained a large cache of chemicals, gasoline, and fuel additives. The suspect told investigators that he used these products to make “super fuel” for the model airplanes that he raced. However, he offered no explanation for the far more ominous canister clearly marked “Sarin Gas” that the detectives also found in the house. They immediately exited the house and called for hazardous materials support personnel.

Sarin gas is a highly toxic chemical nerve agent. On March 20, 1995, a Japanese terrorist group dispersed Sarin gas in three Tokyo subway lines at the height of morning rush hour. Twelve people died as a result, and 5,500 people required medical treatment.

Fearing that they had discovered a potential weapon of mass destruction, the JTTF responded and conferred with ranking police and emergency management personnel on the scene. The NYPD’s elite hazardous materials team, the Emergency Service Unit (ESU), entered the house and safely contained the canister. Because no facilities in the city existed to safely perform the tests needed to identify the contents of the canister, the ESU transported the canister to the NYPD’s outdoor range in the Bronx. The JTTF followed established procedures and contacted the U.S. Army Technical Escort Unit in Aberdeen, Maryland, which immediately dispatched a team to the Bronx location.

Once the technical escort team contained the canister in its own cylinder, they boarded a military aircraft, which flew the team and their potentially deadly package back to Aberdeen. The JTTF followed established procedures and contacted the U.S. Army Technical Escort Unit in Aberdeen, Maryland, which immediately dispatched a team to the Bronx location.

Once the technical escort team contained the canister in its own cylinder, they boarded a military aircraft, which flew the team and their potentially deadly package back to Aberdeen. Tests performed there revealed the canister to be empty. The suspect had told investigators the truth—that he had labeled the canister Sarin gas as a joke. He was arrested on numerous theft charges, the neighborhood returned to normal, and police, fire, and city officials breathed a sigh of relief. The incident proved a good exercise for everyone involved and served as another example of the contacts and services the JTTF can provide.

Conclusion

Since its inception, the FBI-NYPD JTTF has remained on the forefront of the war against terrorism. The World Trade Center bombing proved that Americans could not view terrorism as a malady that affected only other countries. That attack, as well as the Oklahoma City bombing and the bombing at the 1996 Summer Olympics, awakened Americans to the fact that terrorism had come to the United States.

Today, 16 JTTFs stand ready to deter, counter, and respond to acts of terrorism. The FBI-NYPD JTTF, as well as the others throughout the country, remain dedicated to fighting terrorism and eliminating the fear and panic that terrorists rely on to advance their causes. The combining of federal, state, and local law enforcement resources has resulted in effective maximization of resources, the provision of sophisticated investigative and technological resources, and linkage to all federal government resources in the United States and worldwide. The participating law enforcement agencies, working as one, provide the needed knowledge, skills, and resources essential for law enforcement agencies to succeed in fighting the menace of terrorism.

The author gratefully acknowledges NYPD Lt. John Haughie, Detectives Thomas Corrigan and Louis Napoli, FBI Special Agent John J. Liguori, and all of the members of the JTTF for their significant contributions in preparing this article.