

FEATURE



# Critical Decisions During Active Shooter Events

BY TRAVIS NORTON

Do your department's incident commanders (IC) know the difference between a captive and a hostage in an active shooter event? Will they be able to make one of the most challenging decisions of their career and order an intervention if a rescue is necessary? This article focuses on these two questions and provides several useful training tools to inform IC decision-making under these conditions.

## DYNAMICS AND FACTORS AT PLAY

One of the most complex and dangerous adversarial incidents that law enforcement responds to is an active shooter event. These occurrences are an extreme challenge, and problems abound. The response system is tested by the uncertainty of the situation, the high level of risk, the human factor, chance, the potential for severe consequences, and an adversary who is attempting to thwart the will of responders.

Decisions made during these events will be based on ambiguous, incomplete, confusing and even conflicting information. Furthermore, research indicates that law enforcement is not learning from the vast historical repository of lessons. Incident and unified command/leadership problems, indiscriminate parking, inappropriate self-deployment and communications gaps all are issues that provide an opportunity for improvement. SWAT teams sometimes become involved in subsequent phases of the event, where an active shooter could take hostages. However, are these truly hostage situations?

## DEFINING HOSTAGES AND CAPTIVES

A hostage is defined as person kept as a pledge pending the fulfillment of an agreement. The term

hostage conveys the person being held has value to the suspect and that negotiations are a useful strategy. This reveals a problem when dealing with an active shooter who has already killed and is now barricaded in a location with innocent victims. These victims could have been either taken by force or inadvertently trapped when the suspect fled into the location. We default to calling them hostages without the understanding that they are anything more than unfired targets to the suspect. It is fundamentally flawed thinking to believe an active shooter who has just killed 20, will now negotiate for the lives of 10.

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The term captive, on the other hand, conveys the victims have no value to the suspect, and are helpless and in need of rescue. In these circumstances, preparing for an intervention should be the next logical course of action. Your rescue tactics will be context-dependent and derived from the life safety priorities, and your focus of effort will be on preventing the loss of life or great bodily injury. Such a rescue could occur during a window of opportunity.

If a window of opportunity is not created by the suspect's actions, teams can create an exploitation window through the use of distractions. If we are just waiting for the actions of the suspect, we are reactionary, and we do not have the initiative.

## ROLE OF NEGOTIATIONS

Two fundamental principles for hostage situations are essential to remember: 1) The hostage is of no value other than as a tool or device to get what the suspect wants from authorities, and 2) It is in the criminal's interest to not let the situation turn violent.<sup>1</sup> Applied to an active shooter situation, these principles reveal the following questions: What is an active shooter negotiating for? What does the active shooter want from authorities to release those held against their will?

This doesn't mean an active shooter won't negotiate for something they want in return for hostages. Each case is context-dependent, and decisions need to be made based on the circumstances presented. However, if the active shooter does not want anything and is merely holding captives, a rescue could be the correct course of action. Negotiators can communicate to distract the suspect while the SWAT team prepares for an intervention. If they are talking and not killing, then negotiations are a valuable tool.

## TIME VS. OPPORTUNITY

In the Pulse nightclub shooting after-action report, one agency's policy states, "Once a situation has been contained in a specific location, time is on your side." Time belongs to no one. These events are adversarial in nature, meaning they are not only time sensitive but time competitive. They involve opposing wills, the

suspect and law enforcement, who are attempting to gain some type of advantage. Time abandoned or ignored by one side can be exploited by the other. In these situations, time is not as important as opportunity. These opportunities are sporadic and fleeting, and it is critical that they are identified and exploited when they occur.

Another issue raised in the Pulse after-action report is that of intervening in active shooter events. The report states, “Negotiations can create meaningful dialogue, exchange of information, and opportunities to resolve the event without risking further injury to hostages, law enforcement personnel, or the suspect. In addition to buying time and gaining important intelligence, the negotiation process provides much-needed

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time to assemble tactical teams and prepare them for an assault if it does not succeed in securing a peaceful surrender.” The report continues by giving examples of mass public violence/terrorist incidents where the suspects have surrendered. How-

ever, none of the examples given involved hostages. Additionally, the report suggests that law enforcement agencies should “develop specific negotiation protocols recognizing that an immediate overwhelming tactical assault may be the safest and most effective response to resolve a hostage incident during a terrorist attack.”<sup>2</sup>

## MITIGATING RISK, DECISION-MAKING AND INCIDENT COMMANDER TRAINING

During large-scale incidents, law enforcement often responds with whoever is on duty with whatever tools are available. Responders participate in the event because they are available, not because of their knowledge and skills.<sup>3</sup> SWAT team members could encounter ICs who

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do not have the requisite skills and knowledge to command large-scale events. The likelihood of the IC defaulting to calling the captives “hostages” is high and trying to explain the difference between a hostage and a captive followed by why a tactical intervention is necessary will take up time you might not have.

When encountering these types of situations, an IC can mitigate risk by either increasing the information and intelligence gathering to decrease the amount of uncertainty, or operate based on less information. Which is better? It depends on the situation. ICs might want additional information and intelligence to be more certain about their decisions, but there may not be time. ICs might be uncomfortable operating in this type of environment

and hesitant to make crisis decisions without more information.

As time is used to gain more certainty, captives could be in peril when what is clearly needed is an IC with the courage to decide to intervene and order a rescue. To help develop IC crisis decision-making skills under these circumstances, review after-action reports, conduct table-top and decision-making exercises, and invite them to your tactical team’s reality-based training scenarios. The following includes more information on these helpful training tools:

- After-action reports (AARs): AARs on large-scale critical incidents involving an adversary are readily available on the internet and are open source material. The National Police Foundation website contains many

reports, including the Pulse nightclub AAR. Case studies can be conducted with your team and department leadership using these AARs. They can also stimulate discussion on how a similar incident would be handled by your agency’s response system.

- Decision-making exercises (DMEs): DMEs are situational exercises on paper representing a snapshot in time. The facilitator sets a short time limit for the learner to come up with a solution to the problem presented. Once time is up, you can ask how they would have handled the situation and generate discussion. Those exposed to a practical problem in a DME format are gaining artificial experience they can call upon in a real crisis. When confronted with a real-world situation, those who have practiced crisis

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## ACTIVE SHOOTER DECISION-MAKING EXERCISE

Consider the following active shooter scenario. Review the questions posed and decide what course of action you would take.

*You are arriving at an active shooter event where the suspect has shot and killed multiple people inside a business. The scene is chaotic with officers inappropriately self-deploying and parking indiscriminately as they arrive. Ambulances and your incoming armor resources are having a difficult time accessing the crisis site because of the parking issue. Radio communication systems are overloaded with superfluous radio traffic and the command post is too close to the crisis site. You meet with the incident commander who is overwhelmed by events, and trying to gain situational awareness is proving problematic. You are able to learn the suspect has taken hostages and is barricaded in a rear office. SWAT team members are now arriving and beginning to form an emergency rescue team and a hasty entry plan should it become necessary. A negotiator says the suspect is not making any demands or attempting to negotiate for the release of the hostages but states he will not be taken alive.*

### Questions:

- **Are these really hostages? If they are not hostages, what are they?**
- **Do these circumstances necessitate a tactical intervention as soon as feasible?**
- **How long are you going to wait to conduct an intervention with an active shooter who is not negotiating?**

decision-making using DMEs have the advantage of being able to develop solutions and exercise options practiced in the DME format.

- **Reality-based training scenarios:** To lessen self-induced friction during actual operations, include ICs in your tactical teams' reality-based training scenarios. During these scenarios, teams can work through friction points such as the decisions discussed in this article, by talking through how these decisions will be made during an actual event. Incorporating uncertain, ambiguous and confusing information into the scenario will help mirror real-life situations. Due to the immersive nature of this type of training, participants will process the experience as if it were actually happening.<sup>4</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Large-scale incidents involving active shooters will continue to occur, some of which could force your agency's ICs to make crisis decisions on whether or not to rescue captives. Agency decision-makers should understand the difference between hostages and captives in active shooter situations and how negotiations can assist in these events.

Without the previously mentioned training and planning, self-induced friction could slow your operational tempo to a crawl. During the crisis is not the time to be debating the need for an intervention or explaining a hostage vs. a captive to an IC. Doing anything less than training for these possibilities could cost lives when a high-risk/low-frequency active shooter event happens in your jurisdiction. Stay safe.

## ENDNOTES

1. Heal, S. (2008). Dynamics of hostage rescue techniques. Lesson Plans.
2. Straub, F., Cambria, J., Castor, J., Gorban, B., Meade, B., Waltemeyer, D., & Zeunik, J., (2017). Rescue, response, and resilience: A critical incident review of the Orlando public safety response to the attack on the Pulse Nightclub. Retrieved from [www.policefoundation.org](http://www.policefoundation.org)
3. Heal, S. (2012). Field Command. New York, NY: Lantern.
4. Murray, K. (2004). Training at the speed of life. Gotha, FL: Armiger Publications

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