

# **The Hidden Success & Failure Factors for the “SLOW PART-TIME SWAT TEAM” Leadership & Operational Experience**

By: Jeff Felts

Over the past decade part-time SWAT teams have organized in communities across the nation. They have proliferated particularly in smaller communities to meet the growing demands that criminals and modern day policing require. This is a credit to forward thinking administrations that had the ability to foresee the need for these services and took proactive measures to establish a part time SWAT team.

That being said, the passage of time gives these organizations the opportunity to assess how effective their part-time SWAT team has become while focusing on its realistic capabilities and limitations. To do this, egos must be checked at the door, and you must be brutally honest with your self and organization. Begin by asking yourself the following questions;

1. If you had a choice, would you want your SWAT team conducting a hostage rescue where your family members were the victims? If not, why?
2. Was the creation of a rarely used part-time SWAT Team really the right thing to do?
3. Is it really in the best interest of our organization, your officers, and most importantly your citizens to have a slow part time SWAT team?
4. Could a different organization provide the same service to my jurisdiction in a more effective and efficient manner?
5. Could we enhance the level of SWAT service we provide by partnering with surrounding jurisdictions?
6. Do a majority of the line officers in your Police Dept. have confidence in your SWAT team? If not, why?
7. What can we do to improve and increase our readiness?

I can't answer any of those questions for you. But I think a good place to start examining these issues is to look at the actual workload of your SWAT team and the level of support the organization actually provides in terms of budget, manpower, and training time. Do an in-depth cost benefit analysis and determine from a purely business perspective if your agency is getting an acceptable return on its investment. Then examine all the intangible pro's & con's that having a SWAT team brings to other facets of the organization. Things like having SWAT trained cops working in the patrol division 24/7, training opportunities, additional career paths etc.. Don't forget about the con's

such as scheduling problems, overtime, jealousy etc.. Lastly, if you answered no to question #1, make a list of realistic and practical solutions, which if implemented over a period of time, would cause you to change your answer to the affirmative.

Over the past twelve years I have had the opportunity to listen to some very experienced and knowledgeable folks speak on SWAT related topics. People like Derrick Bartlett (Ft. Lauderdale PD), Ron McCarthy (LAPD Ret.), Stuart Myers (Montgomery Co. PD Ret.), Gary Roverino (LA Co. SEB – Ret.), John Peterson (SOF), and Jeff Chudwin (Chief of Police – Olympia Fields PD). The first thing these men will tell you is that if your department is not going to completely support contemporary SWAT standards in terms of funding, training time, and man-power, the team should not be created.

But what if your agency is supporting your “Slow part-time Team” with the necessary funding, allocating suitable training time, and has staffed the team appropriately? Does this level of support alone justify the existence of the team? That’s obviously up to your Chief law Enforcement Officer(s) discretion. That being said, let me offer this thought as you examine your organization. Again, if you had the choice, which one of the following two teams would you want coming to save your families life if they were being held hostage?

1. A “Slow part-time SWAT Team” that trains to NTOA standards with a work load of six or less operations in an average year? (Mostly single person barricaded gunmen)
2. Or, would you rather have a part-time team that trains to NTOA standards and conducts, at the least, dozens of operations a year? (Mostly narcotic warrant service)

This is where we have to realize our limitations. Training to validated standards with minimal operational experience may be providing the “Slow part-time SWAT TEAM” and it’s administrators with a false sense of security and over confidence. As police officers we all realize that nothing replaces experience. That also applies to SWAT Teams. Experience could be the difference between success or failure in any operation. It will definitely be a major factor in any high-risk felony warrant service or hostage rescue application. Further, to send your slow part time team to execute high intensity operations such as hostage rescue or the more common high-risk felony warrant service on known shooters or violent criminals without conducting more of the low intensity operations to workout problems, keep the mind fresh, and to gain invaluable operational experience, is an invitation to eventual tragedy. These high intensity operations require near flawless execution or lots of luck to be successful. The odds of success for any team that is rarely used cannot be as high as a team that is used more

often given everything else is equal. I equate this type of philosophy to a high school baseball team expecting to make it to the Major league World Series without ever playing in the minor leagues.

To that end, as a leader on your SWAT team you have a responsibility to yourself, the men you lead, and the people you work for to ensure the readiness of your unit. At times that job requires that you inform your superiors of actual or potential organizational problems that they may, or may not be aware of. These problems may be things they want to hear about, and then again, they may be things they don't want to hear about. Whatever the case is, failure to bring them to their attention would be an abrogation of your responsibilities as a leader. Failure to do so as a police supervisor can lead to unnecessary injury of our officers or innocent citizens. It could lead to criminal and or civil charges against supervisors and certainly civil litigation for your department and community. But by far, the worst thing that could happen would be trying to look in a mirror knowing that you chose to do nothing, very little, or gave in to internal pressure, and as a result someone under your command or an innocent citizen was seriously injured or killed.

Only when your leaders come to the realization that your slow, rarely used, part time SWAT team is getting closer and closer to the ultimate call out, where the decisions they are making now will influence the eventual outcome either in a negative or positive manner, can you begin to understand my position. In SWAT sniping we have a motto that says, "There are no excuses for poor performance". I believe that motto extends to police administrators as well. People's lives will depend on every decision you and your administration make, or fail to make. Some of these decisions may seem administrative in nature or antiseptic in the confines of today's boardroom, but make no mistake, they do have tremendous secondary affects that influence everything from recruiting and retention to the justification and readiness of the team.

There are many superbly qualified part-time SWAT teams across the nation. But many part-time teams that were created with the best of intentions may have become more of a liability than an asset to their departments due to less than adequate organizational support, poor or uninformed leadership, and over confidence from past success. For instance, many part-time teams don't get anywhere near the NTOA recommended monthly training time. Many part-time teams only have 7-15 operators. Considering 2/3's as an anticipated response, even the 15 man team has no where near enough man power to properly conduct the common barricade of a single family residence. Now, throw in the in-experienced part-time team whose annual work load may include relatively low intensity operations such as a couple barricades and a couple narcotic warrant services a year. Add the fact that many of these teams have very limited

budgets so they don't possess the most up to date technology. Now I ask you, do you want a team that is under funded, under manned, and in-experienced coming to save your family? Or would you prefer to have a well trained, well equipped, properly staffed, and more experienced SWAT Team execute the mission?

So why are some part-time SWAT Teams so slow in terms of the number of call outs they do each year? This answer ultimately lies in one of two categories.

1. They really are that slow – Question of justification should be considered. Also consider joining a consortium or expanding your current consortium.
2. Executive leadership / Philosophy & Knowledge.
  - Your leadership can't help you gain the experience you need unless you inform them of how important it is to your readiness and capabilities.
  - You have to realize that some Chief's don't want to pull the genie out of its bottle until it's absolutely necessary, and by then it could be too late. There are a number of reasons this could be occurring, but the most common reasons identified by SWAT operators are:
    - Overtime budget concerns.
    - Your Chief may not have had access to a SWAT team as a patrol officer or young command officer. In his day critical incidents were handled by the patrol division to the best of its ability. If it were not for the fact that surrounding agencies started manning SWAT teams and politicians began asking questions on how your PD would handle critical incidents, you probably would not have a SWAT team today.
    - Unfortunately these philosophies trickle down to sub-element leaders within the police organization and your team is viewed as an absolute last resort or a necessary evil, instead of the force multiplier and life saving asset that it really is.
  - The most common cause in my opinion, based on my experience and conversations with SWAT operators across Michigan and the nation, is that police executives fail to hold sub-element commanders accountable for poor decisions they make relating to the decision not to use SWAT in high-risk situations. This is especially damaging to the justification of the part-time SWAT Team in the first place. It also reinforces poor decision making and tactics behind the theory of the "no body got hurt" attitude. This is not to suggest that we begin to second guess or micro manage our officers or their supervisors, but to simply ensure that mistakes are not repeated and that proper decisions are being made in the future.
  - Examples include deliberate dynamic warrant service with circumstances beyond the capabilities of the average investigative unit. (i.e. known firearms present / violent criminal history / multiple suspects / etc.) Most

administrators have no idea that more officers are shot during warrant service operations than on barricaded gunmen or hostage rescue operations.

- Some patrol divisions are operating beyond their capabilities at times as well. This has become more common since the advent of “tactically equipped” scout cars in many patrol forces. Many of these types of units were initially equipped with patrol rifles, less lethal, and shields after the infamous Bank of America and Columbine incidents so patrol officers could respond effectively to active shooter and other events that required specialized equipment by the first responders. It is now becoming more and more common to see and hear of these units handling tactical situations that SWAT should be called to handle. These units are completely necessary and provide a needed service to the agencies they serve, but patrol supervisors need to remember that they are not the SWAT Team, and they have definite limitations.
- Police Chiefs and other Executives should take into consideration the legal concepts of “foreseeability and deliberate indifference” when reviewing questionable decisions by supervisors not to use SWAT. It is understood that Policing is inherently dangerous. However, it could easily be argued that barring an exigent circumstance that required immediate action by officers on scene, there could be some level of liability associated with allowing a group of minimally trained and equipped police officers to deliberately conduct a tactical operation beyond their capability. Especially if that operation results in an officer, suspect, or innocent citizen getting hurt, if in fact that agency had the foresight and need to create, fund, man, and train a SWAT team that was readily available had the decision been made to call them out.

So how do we better justify our part-time SWAT Team, gain the experience we need to be effective, and really live up to our professional motto of “SWAT SAVES LIVES”? To do this it may take some of that often spoke about, but seldom used, “Outside of the box thinking”. It will definitely take strong leadership.

1. The first thing that must happen is an honest assessment of your SWAT organization. You have to identify whether or not your agency is 100% committed to contemporary SWAT Standards. If it’s not committed in any one of the basic components of appropriate funding, training time, and man-power, someone has to have the leadership to step-up and correct these shortcomings, or suggest dissolving the unit and relying on another SWAT team for this service. We owe that to ourselves, fellow officers, administrators, and most of all our communities. Doing this requires leadership in the truest sense of the word.

2. If your team is receiving support from the administration, but is extremely slow and would like to further justify its existence while increasing its experience and readiness for more complex future operations, there are several ways to accomplish these goals:
- The easiest way is to work with your narcotic section. They serve warrants for a living. Many departments around the country have SWAT serve all dynamic entry narcotic and high-risk felony warrants. Many departments don't. So by working with your narcotics section with an agreement that they call your team out at least once a month, your call outs for warrant services will go up. This is important, as the team will go through the motions of receiving the call out, responding, planning, deploying & executing the operation. The experience of serving more warrants could pay huge dividends as dynamic warrant service in its simplest form can be loosely compared to a hostage rescue operation, with a different objective.
  - One way to compel all sections of your agency to use SWAT for warrant services is to have a risk assessment matrix put into your policy & procedures. This places responsibility on unit commanders to use SWAT once the assessment reaches a certain level of risk. This is a wonderful idea, but it will not work unless it has total support at the highest levels of the department.
  - Consider joining a consortium. By doing this the geographic area and population you cover will multiply and the odds of call-outs will increase. There are also budgetary and manpower advantages in multi-jurisdictional organizations.
  - Become a training provider for your department or organization. Topics that SWAT could be tasked to instruct include, patrol response to the active shooter, firearms, less lethal applications, Use of force training, building clearing, raid planning & execution, tactical operations school for your command officers, and anything else that is tactically related to police work. Although your agency may already have a core of officers assigned to teach these types of topics, its hard to believe that in most cases they can provide better tactical training than what the SWAT officer or team could provide if given the chance. This is also quite an opportunity to increase cohesiveness between the SWAT Team and the rest of the department.

Preparation for this article included the query of the secured chat room called "Snipersonline" where I asked 300 SWAT snipers from around the country if they had experienced an increase of call outs through warrant service, and if so, did it raised their teams level of readiness. Every response I received supported the position that any increase in operational experience upped the organizational readiness. There were no responses to the contrary.

To conclude this article I would like to suggest adding an element to the core group of essential components of support identified as requirements to having a SWAT Team:

1. Funding: Equipment purchasing, maintenance, & training supplies.
2. Manpower: Consider the lessons learned from around the country.
3. Training: As recommended by NTOA for part-time teams.
4. **Experience: Increases odds of future success.**

At some point in time your part time SWAT team may be called on to conduct a hostage rescue operation. Even with all the other essential components of support in place, the one variable will be performance at the moment of truth. You will have no room for error. Yes, if you train with a purpose, it is said you will perform in a like manner. I am a firm believer in that philosophy. However, it is my contention that if you combine meaningful training with practical operational experience the odds of achieving success increase dramatically.

Sgt. Jeff Felts is a 12-year veteran of the Plymouth Twp. PD (Michigan). He spent 11.5 years on the Western Wayne County Special Operations Team, 10.5 as a sniper and 3.5 as the sniper team leader. He spent a total of 12 years in the Army on both active and reserve duty as an MP and an infantry drill sergeant. He holds an associate degree in CJ, a bachelor degree in business administration, and is a graduate of North Western University School of Police Staff & Command. He is the owner and Chief Instructor of Center Mass, Inc. ([www.centermassinc.com](http://www.centermassinc.com)). He is an advisory Board Member of the American Sniper Association and a member of the following organizations: NTOA, MTOA, ITOA, ASLET, & ASA. Jeff can be reached at [centermass@comcast.net](mailto:centermass@comcast.net) or 734-416-0047.