

SWAT team's mission: Prevent loss of life in dangerous situations

In a dark and abandoned apartment near San Benito, a dangerous suspect armed with various assault rifles barricades himself and a hostage as Cameron County Sheriff's Department deputies call for backup and proceed to set a perimeter around the area.

A green armored truck pulls up carrying the department's Special Weapons and Tactics team as it prepares to make an entry.

With a loud crash the door shatters and SWAT team members barge in the apartment. Moving from room to room with their weapons aimed forward, the team looks for the suspect and makes sure any threat is contained. Once the suspect is spotted he is surrounded and team members demand he put his weapon down. Once the situation is over, the suspect and deputies shake hands.

The scenario described is not reality. It is part of a regular training program that prepares deputies to be ready for the worst.

Cameron County Sheriff Omar Lucio said the department's SWAT team is comprised of 25 specially trained deputies. They are called upon when a situation has the potential to escalate in danger.

"They are here for protection of our cities," Lucio said. "Whenever our deputies are placed in danger, such as conducting dangerous arrests, the SWAT team is called. First, we use negotiators to try to get the subject to stand down and turn themselves in."

Typically in real-life situations, the SWAT team sits by in a perimeter area conducting surveillance and planning the entry process, but doesn't move in until all other means of securing the suspect have been spent, the sheriff said.

When the team conducts operations, its members are trained to show restraint. "They will only fire as a last resort or when fired upon," Lucio said.



Brad Doherty/The Brownsville Herald

The sheriff said the SWAT team is a way to prepare for a worst case scenario and prevent the loss of lives.

"They'll go through scenarios such as situations at schools and buildings, hostage situations, holed up snipers, barricaded individuals and also high-level narcotics traffickers who have access to specialized weapons," Lucio said.

Experienced deputies are screened and evaluated physically and psychologically before undergoing specialized training, which includes physical conditioning, close-quarter combat tactics, the use of assault rifles, as well as the use of flash-bangs, gas canisters and other diversionary tools.

SWAT team members carry an average of 40-60 pounds of gear, including Kevlar body armor with reinforced ballistic plates, assault weapons, ammunition and various devices aimed at creating confusion to rapidly subdue a suspect. The team also uses a Lenco BearCat armored vehicle with a special battering ram, which can be used for quick entries.

Lucio said the team regularly assists law enforcement departments of other municipalities, which may not have the manpower for a tactical squad.

Continued:

SWAT team's mission: Prevent loss of life in dangerous situations

"Sometimes we assist federal agencies like the Drug Enforcement Administration, Customs and Border Protection, or the FBI on what they call major arrests," Lucio said. "We're there to assist all law enforcement agencies if they need us."

On June 1, 2007, Sheriff's Department and San Benito SWAT team members assisted DEA agents in the arrest of David Sepulveda, 38, who was charged with conspiracy to possess marijuana and cocaine with intent to distribute.

During the arrest at a trailer park in La Paloma, Sepulveda's bodyguard, Mario Cabrera Linares, opened fire with an AK-47 assault rifle and struck SWAT team member Angel Perez in the face. Other team members engaged Cabrera and killed him during a 10-minute firefight, Lucio said.

For the team's leader, Lt. Danny Huerta, the pressure was increased because he is not only responsible for the success of the mission at the time, but for the safety of his teammates as well. Huerta, who has been with the sheriff's department for 23 years and been a member of SWAT for eight, was present when Perez was injured and said the team's training and determination pulled the mission through.

I felt bad and when it happened, what one thinks about is saving him and pulling him out of there," Huerta said. "What happened is that we reverted back to our training and the ways we trained in protecting and extracting injured people."

After a year and a half of surgeries and rehabilitation, Perez rejoined the SWAT team in December.

"We are here for the protection of the public," Lucio said. "We are here to serve."