

# Greater than the sum of its parts

## K9/SWAT Integration

In my 15 years as a tactical deputy for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Special Enforcement Bureau, I have witnessed the significant influx of technology into tactical resolutions. My unit has robots that are big, small, throwable along with the capacity to open a door or deliver chemical agents. We have a room dedicated to keeping the batteries charged for drones, eyeball cameras, drone killers, under door cameras and listening devices. This technology has aided in apprehension of dangerous suspects and kept teammates from exposure to additional risk. Our robots were struck by gunfire numerous times and were absolutely critical in the successful outcome of those operations. However, I would trade away any of the above technological advancements before I ever gave up having a fully integrated canine unit.

### SWAT-SIDE Perspective

The groundwork that led to the success of SEB's K9/SWAT integration happened long before I was assigned to a team. Generations prior recognized the positive impact a fully integrated K9 team could have upon an operation and built the requisite bridges between the details to make it work. I will share my perspective as a team scout tasked with the responsibility of developing tactical plans to safely resolve a high-risk call-out. It should be noted that I am not a qualified handler, in fact I have several dogs and they sleep on the couch, watch TV in my bed and know what pizza crust and French fries taste like. Despite my lack of qualified handler knowledge, SEB's integration system works for a multitude of reasons.

Of paramount importance is trust between the details and individual skill sets. From the tactical team perspective, I want to know that the canine team exhibits the following attributes:

- Successfully found hidden suspects
- Canine can move in and around my teammates in close proximity
- If the canine goes on a bite, it will continue to fight until recalled or removed by handler
- My teammates are safe if the canine comes across them holding a corner of an adjacent room

I trust the handlers to select, train and test their canine partners to ensure they have the necessary skills, ability and temperament to integrate into the SWAT component. I have no idea how they accomplish this task or what criteria they select canines by. I met the handler's new partner to learn that only a month later they were returned to the vendor or kennel. From my experience, when K9 Detail said the dog is ready for SWAT integration it has been. Whatever matrix they evaluate the canine by prior to allowing integration is extremely successful from a SWAT perspective.

Another critical component is a solid working relationship between the tactical team and K9 unit with a shared idea of each other's responsibilities. One of us is working for the other depending on the operation and those roles can flip back and forth. For example, say a wanted suspect

ran back into a home but containment was loose while waiting for responding patrol units. The barricade suspect operation is the tactical team responsibility and the K9 team will integrate into the arrest team. Prior to placing SWAT containment personnel, I will likely want to sanitize the adjacent yards since the target home was not immediately contained by patrol. The responsibility will switch to K9 with SWAT personnel protecting the handler and covering the angles while the dog does his search. I don't give up overall responsibility of the operation but the focus of that element shifts to the handler as we sanitize and then back to me.

Area searches for extremely dangerous suspects such as those who shot at law enforcement will contain tactical team elements. The responsibility remains with K9 with SWAT acting as a support element for handler protection and suspect apprehension. If the search led to a barricaded suspect operation or hostage rescue then the responsibility seamlessly transfers to the tactical team. The striking part of SEB's integration is that it happens without effort and this sharing of responsibility is woven into how we think and operate.

Having a solid working relationship and trust in one another's ability leads to honest dialogue between the SWAT component and handlers. When searching inside structures for dangerous suspects we are all at risk and the K9 handler is under pressure to ensure his dog performs. We train the tactical team not to watch the dog work and concentrate on their area of responsibility. The handler will tell us if the dog showed any interest in a particular area or if he needs to get closer to re-evaluate the displayed behavior. We will always recheck the canine's work but also want honest assessment from the handler and if what we are asking the canine to do is outside its ability.

## **K-9 SIDE Perspective**

I was first assigned to SEB as a member of the Special Weapons Team in 2017 and after a year an opportunity to switch to the tactical canine unit became available. My views are formed from having worked both units in high-risk tactical operations and witnessing what makes each repeatedly successful. Although the two details have slightly different missions in the tactical space neither one would be as effective if it not for the other unit.

The first key to a well-designed K9/SWAT integration program is having a high performing canine program. The procurement of quality animals, training of those animals, and the training and selection of handlers needs to be established. Assuming that criteria has been met then the ground work of an integrated K9/SWAT program can begin.

For a handler to properly integrate into the SWAT mission, those who work in a tactical environment must have a good working relationship and SWAT must trust the handler. That trust starts in the selection of personnel who are assigned as tactical handlers. Tactical handlers need to pass all the same shooting, physical and critical thinking testing that are required of all SWAT personnel. At SEB the testing process for becoming a canine handler is run in conjunction with SWAT testing with only a small section of the interview having canine specific questions. When a new handler is selected, before being paired with a canine partner they must complete SEB SWAT School. Additionally new handlers will be assigned to one of SEB's six Special Weapons Teams for a period of months where they will receive additional SWAT specific training. Only after successfully completing their SWAT training will they be paired with a canine partner.

A candidate knowing they must complete SWAT training and be regularly called upon to augment as a member of the Special Weapons Team attracts the type of candidate we are looking for. I often receive phone calls from deputies interested in applying for the position,

expressing how much they love dogs. I will tell those candidates that an interest in dogs and dog training is a requirement for the job. However, I will follow up with questions about their interest in working as a tactical deputy and all its entails. I explain to them that I spend more time with a rifle in my hand than a leash. Candidates often realize this isn't the job they envision, and they would be better served working as a handler at one of our detection units. To be a fully integrated tactical handler, one must first be a tactical deputy.

For canines to properly integrate into the tactical environment they need to be experienced with a solid base in all the skills of a patrol dog. These skills include being able to search independently of but under control of the handler. This means the dog can verbally recall and be redirected while searching without the use of a long line. Additionally, the dog must be able to reliably locate and alert on hidden inaccessible suspects, engage passive suspects and maintain an engagement without support from the handler.

Before a dog is used in the tactical environment it needs to have real patrol level "finds" of hiding inaccessible suspects and real-world engagements. The dog must bite and hold suspects independent of the handler and prove they will not release a bite until safe to do so at the direction of the handler. In addition to the core patrol skills, a tactical dog must be neutral to the tactical environment. This includes neutrality to gun fire, flashbangs, chemical agents and less lethal launchers. The dog must be able to work in dark confined areas, including chemical agent filled environments. In addition to all the above, a tactical dog must be neutral to the tactical team. This requires repeated reps of the dog running training scenarios (beginning in muzzle) in and around the team until everyone (including SWAT) is confident that the dog understands the team environment and will not engage a team member.

The crucial element in a successful SWAT/K-9 integration is communication. The SWAT Scout and tactical handler must have a free and open line of communication to have the best chance of mission success. Handlers need to have a basic understanding of the overall mission to know how to best be used as a tool and Scouts need to understand the limitations and capabilities of the dog to best implement them as a tool in their toolbox.

With communication comes the understanding of the limitations of canine in the tactical space. Canines are animals and despite all the training in the world they don't come with remote controls. No matter how bad you want the dog to turn left sometimes they just won't do it. Additionally, dogs can indicate the presence of a suspect when nothing is there except dirty laundry behind the door. Additionally, they can make mistakes and miss a suspect. A skilled experienced handler can mitigate these but that does not mean it can't happen. The good news is a dog can't lie, if they alert on a door then they think someone is on the other side and if they don't alert, they believe the door to be clear. It is the handler's job to watch their dog work and learn to tell when the dog had interest with no alert or a slow alert on a door that might only have dirty laundry behind it. Tactical planning should include the use of a dog when appropriate, but those plans should include contingencies and back up plans. Additionally, handler's need to check their ego and be 100% honest about what their dog can and can't do. Even if that means swapping for a different dog or swapping a dog for a robot.

Communication will often prevent problems before they happen. For example, while developing a gas plan on a barricaded suspect, the handler overhears the Scout discussing using a combination of OC and CS barrier penetrators shot from 40mm launchers. The handler should speak up and suggest to only use CS as it has no effect on canine olfactory senses, however the OC has a similar effect on dogs as it does humans, which would obviously affect the dog's ability to search the structure later in the operation should it become necessary. The decision on which gas to use still ultimately lies with the Scout but now he can make a more informed decision rather than finding out after OC has been deployed the dog may have trouble locating a hiding suspect.

Another example would be ARV placement in front of structure. The Scout may assume that a non-compliant suspect who exits the structure could easily be seen by the dog and apprehended because he can stand behind the ARV, look over the vehicle parked in the driveway and see the front door. The handler needs to remind the Scout the dog is only 2-3' tall and can't see over the parked car in the driveway. A problem that can often be remedied by only a slight adjustment of the ARV. This communication is established in training and should not be done for the first time in a real-world operation.

Bottom line Scouts/SWAT need to understand they are not handlers and need to defer to the handler when it comes to the dog and what it is capable of. In addition, a tactical handler needs to understand that on a SWAT operation they are a valuable tool in the toolbox, but the Scout has the responsibility to make all final tactical decisions on SWAT operations.

### **Making it work**

The success of the K9/SWAT integration is grounded in both detail's mutual respect for one another and the willingness to share responsibilities. If your agency struggles with integration or finds resistance from one side, maybe it is time to sit down and hash out those differences. The end result of such an effort is the sum is far greater than the parts. The increased safety to tactical personnel, greater likelihood of apprehension and overall contribution to saving lives is worth the effort.

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