

## School Shootings

“Wait and See” is Not An Option!

By Paul Howe

I've been involved in several discussions about the recent school shootings in Colorado and Pennsylvania. While I applaud the swift response and containment of the suspect in the Colorado shootings and believe it prevented the loss of life, there is still much room for improvement in three areas:

- \* Tactical Leadership and Training

- \* Active Shooter Response Team, React Team, Emergency Assault Team

- \* Individual Responsibility

Most of us know that the first response is critical to saving lives. The motto “protect and serve” should not be a saying stenciled on the side of your patrol car for the public's viewing pleasure – it should be a code we live by. I believe that we can do better in all three areas by improving simple issues such as combat mindset, controlled aggressiveness and training.

### **Sanctuary**

Schools should be places of sanctuary, where students are safe to learn and free from harm. Instead, they've become a killing ground where predators come to slay our children with impunity. As Americans and parents, we should have zero tolerance of violence in school areas. I am not talking about the occasional fist fight kids get into, but rather the deadly premeditated actions of a few. Bringing a weapon to school with the intent of causing harm should be a death sentence for those carrying or using it. This death sentence should be carried out by teachers, parents on site, police and tactical officers. Failure to act aggressively and immediately will only result in more deaths. Even one more death is too much. There are no acceptable losses in this battle. Finally, I do not know of any cases in school scenarios where violence or loss of life did not result from allowing these individuals more time to act. From the single shooter, to multiple shooters, to terrorists, time is on their side unless we take it back! We know the answers to the test, but are we as a nation willing to address the problems? It will require work from all areas to be successful.

### **Tactical Leadership and Training**

I have witnessed leadership failures in military and law enforcement tactical scenarios for several reasons, the most common being the selection and training process. Legislative and mandated training in political correctness, cultural diversity, racial profiling and dealing with the emotionally disturbed has taken precedence over saving our children. We have failed to train patrol (our first responders) to a higher level. Higher level training for first responders will save civilian as well as law enforcement lives. Many times we focus on liability as an excuse not to train.

More recently in law enforcement, I've watched administrations emplace Swat tactical leaders over tactical team leaders who have never been in that particular arena. While others were earning their keep on the team or on the street, these folks circumvented the system. Many were put into position because of promotions or *who* they knew, not *what* they knew or because they earned it. No one took the time to counsel them and find out if they possess the necessary skill sets. Most don't know the capabilities or limitations of their tactical unit. Swat leadership needs to take an active role in all aspects of their team's training.

I have recently watched one major department's leadership call a hostage rescue situation a "barricaded person." The situation dragged on for hours while snipers had plenty of opportunity to take shots and end the problem. It was not until another agency intervened and stopped the mobility of the situation that it was resolved. Only then did the hostage have to knock the gun from the bad guy's hand and escape. This result came about because the tactical leadership took no action, nor were the team leaders allowed to by their leadership. The administration's answer to this problem was to shuffle the Lieutenant in question to another area of the department. I would like to see leadership in these situations become criminally and civilly liable for inaction. With certain jobs comes much responsibility. It is time for administrations and leadership to be held accountable. We must also require active shooter training in the academy, and it *must* be held more than once a year. These are perishable skills and they must be practiced – there is no other option! An additional benefit: practicing these skills will make the individual officer safer with their weapon systems during individual movement, team movement, etc. People, there is no downside to increasing active shooter training!

### **Team Leadership**

As an active shooter team leader, you have a duty to neutralize the threat. Not contain and "wait and see." You are normally in charge of a team of heavily armed officers generally fighting a 4-1 or 4-2 battle, the odds being in your favor. You must not hesitate; you must close with and terminate the threat as rapidly as possible. I've been asked when it becomes a hostage barricade situation vs when it is still considered an active shooter or hostage rescue emergency assault situation. My answer to that is "time." If you arrive within 10 minutes of the shooting, you should close with and neutralize the threat. If you arrive later than 10 minutes, you should probably get a foothold and start to methodically clear.

The problem of wounded on the scene complicates the scenario. I believe that if there are wounded innocents bleeding out in uncleared areas, we have a duty and obligation to recover them immediately. I prefer to push through and past them to create safe zones and then recover them. This means aggressive, dynamic clearing. Again, when they are bleeding and dying, time is *not* on our side. We must have an efficient system to do this.

As a tactical officer, you may think that Command has a grand strategy for the crisis at hand. You may think that during the operation the leadership has a handle on the screams for help that you hear. In most cases, they don't. Lots of the leadership I've been exposed to are untrained, mentally overloaded and unwilling to commit to the fight. At the team

level, you have a duty and obligation to act should your leadership fail to and you *know* it to be the case. You are on scene and have real time information. Act when the situation requires action!

If you don't know how to get in a locked door at a school, it's time to learn - now!! Schools don't move – they are there year round, just waiting for you to get in. Try the knob, use a key or shotgun breach it if you have to, but get in and kill or subdue the threat quickly and efficiently. Speaking of training, as a tactical officer, you could take two men with heart and rusty 870 shotguns and teach them in five minutes how to enter a room, go right and left and neutralize a threat. Why not start now?

### **Individual Responsibility**

I'll put this in plain English: If you as a police officer, a parent or a teacher are not willing to put a child's safety above your own, you are a coward and should cease to breed. We, as a nation of Americans, do not need you or your kind. As for the primary goal of hostage rescue, it is to get between the hostages and the hostage taker as rapidly as possible. At least that is what I have been teaching and have been taught over the last 20 years. The mentality of "protect yourself at all costs" has got to be left behind. The mission is to *protect and serve* – you cannot do this cowering at a breach point or behind your car.

Active Shooter Teams should close with a subject they have contained and render them incapable of causing further injury, especially if hostages are involved. The only way to protect the hostages is to forcibly separate them from the bad guys. This "wait and see" or "let Swat handle it" attitude is unacceptable and has already proven to cost the lives of our children. I don't know how you can posture outside a door, hearing screams, kids calling for help, knowing children are inside being hurt or abused and not act. It is beyond me. If a child is screaming, they are either being hurt or they are witnessing someone being hurt. If the suspect is hurting the children, he is generally not prepared for your attack. This is the time to strike!

Remember - we've disarmed our children, physically and mentally with our current school doctrine. They have nothing except pens, pencils and staplers to protect themselves. How long do you believe they can sustain a fight against an armed adult? As a society, we will be measured on how well we cherish and defend our children. If we choose to place our own well being over that of our kids, our society will fall and civilization as we know it will cease to exist. If you are an individual officer, you can make a difference with the equipment you carry. Thirty years ago, officers did not have patrol rifles, ceramic plates, active shooter bags, etc. Most did not even have body armor. Yet, they went in with revolvers or antiquated shotguns and solved the problem. As a parent or teacher, you can make a difference. A sharp hoe or shovel in the case of the Amish shootings could terminate a threat. If you choose to live without cell phones, that's your choice. If you choose not to act when the time comes, that's also up to you. God will not intervene, he is waiting for you.

## **Mindset**

I borrowed this from Ron McCarthy and it is a simple and easy-to-follow matrix for those who need a flow chart about when you can act.

Law – Is the suspect violating the law and can you use deadly force to resolve the situation? If the answer is yes – keep going!

Policy – Does your policy allow the use of deadly force in this situation? If the answer is yes, keep going.

Ethics – If negotiations are going well and the subject presents himself as a target with the hostage and you can make a safe shot, should you shoot? Answer – Yes. If he later kills the hostage, you've put the suspect's welfare over that of the hostage. The window of opportunity only stays open so long. Then you need to force it open and this may cause you time delays which generally favor the suspect. We must manage time and the health and welfare of the innocent.

Two common denominators for deaths in active shooter incidents are the “wait and see” mentality and the containment protocol. I wrote my book **Leadership and Training for the Fight** based on my experiences over the years. What drove me to write it was the lack of combat mindset at both the individual and leadership levels. Leadership cannot be underestimated or ignored, or more innocents will die unnecessarily. We have nurtured a generation of “Gucci gear” officers who think their outfits and equipment makes them cool, and they forget their real mission. Thousands of dollars in equipment such as body armor, high speed rifles, helmets and active shooter bags will not make it to the fight if the officer carrying it does not have the *will* and the *heart* to go into harm's way for a higher cause.

Realistic tactical training and aggressive action is essential to ensure we're successful and not merely mediocre performers. Our children are looking to us to save them and set the example. The next time they cry for help, we must respond with speed, surprise and surgical violence of action.

## **Key Points**

- \* If subjects are actively injuring hostages, it is a good time to strike.
- \* Provide more realistic training, equipment and mindset to patrol and first responders and require swift and decisive action.
- \* If officers are not ready and willing to take a life to save a life, move them out.
- \* The above comment applies to all levels of tactical leaders.
- \* Administrators and leaders – train your patrol officers to respond and place a heavy emphasis on this in the academy and sustainment training.

## **About the Author**

Paul R. Howe is a 20 year veteran and former Special Operations soldier and instructor. Paul currently owns Combat Shooting and Tactics (CSAT) where he consults with, trains and evaluates law enforcement and government agencies in technical and tactical

techniques throughout the special operations spectrum. See [www.combatshootingandtactics.com](http://www.combatshootingandtactics.com) for details.