Timing & Execution

By Jay Fuller, ALEA Safety Staff

The situation did not look good. A militant extremist group had taken six hostages during a foiled bank robbery attempt and was holding them inside the bank. The group was heavily armed and one hostage had already been killed. Though negotiations were underway, it was obvious from the outset that the hostage takers were more interested in making a splash than taking any money. SWAT was told to get ready, and specific response planning was initiated. One guaranteed element of the operation would be a helicopter insertion of personnel on the two-story bank rooftop. Due to a variety of small structures and impediments on the roof, an actual touch down by the aircraft would be impossible; consequently, the team would be deposited via fast rope.

The SWAT team and aviation unit personnel working in concert had developed standard procedures for this type of operation over several years. Quarterly training had made all personnel, SWAT and aviation alike, thoroughly familiar with their tasks. Doors of the surplus Army UH-1H were pinned open, six team members were strapped into an optimum configuration, and specific seating was positioned in back. The pilot would perform a "quick stop" maneuver over the desired spot, and at the exact instant of aircraft stabilization, a signal from the co-pilot to the SWAT team leader would initiate a rapid and carefully choreographed release of seat belts and exit of the aircraft by team members.

Each move, each footstep had been rehearsed so that every team member knew exactly how to get himself and his gear to the assigned rope with a minimum of maneuvering while not interfering with other team members. With a drop height of 10 feet, exposure time for the entire insertion, from helicopter on short final to helicopter clear of the building on departure, was less than 10 seconds. In order to test coordination and timing, the entire SWAT strike on the hostage site, including helicopter drop, was practiced several times at a city facility several blocks from the situation site. When the call came, the team was ready.

Aviation is a tremendous force multiplier, allowing any given force size to maintain a broader area of responsibility than would be possible by conventional means and providing the capability to accomplish tasks that would not be achievable otherwise. This fact becomes significant when applied to special operations. As in the situation above, law enforcement resources can be inserted at unreachable locations, usually in time frames that are tactically valid. And for those special operations that involve hazardous, life threatening deployments, this fact becomes extremely important.

Therein lies the difficulty when it comes to maintaining a safe environment. As opposed to "routine" law enforcement work, which has its moments, many special operations put their practitioners in harms way every time they are deployed. This fact is not lost on any law enforcement agency with which I'm familiar. From what I've seen, procedures are carefully defined, and training time and equipment are more heavily allocated to special ops. If aviation is to be part of a hazardous special operation, it needs to be a full partner in this preparation and training.

Aviation mishaps are not our only concern here. Even if accomplished without incident, a badly timed or poorly performed aviation assault can impair a good strike plan, negatively impacting the entire operation. As we saw in the situation above, all tactics and communication involving aviation needs to be worked out cooperatively between the special ops unit and the aviation unit. Standards must be established, procedures should be defined and practiced to familiarity, and limitations must be set and fully understood by all.

Also, just because the decision has been made to press on into harms way, continuing risk-reward analysis is required. Unnecessary risks should never be undertaken, and the risk inherent in any aviation maneuver must be weighed against the tactical gain for the operation as a whole. Most high hazard, high profile special ops actions will have a senior, experienced unit supervisor, with his or her "fingers on the pulse," making deployment decisions and guiding actions during the operation. This individual needs to be intimately aware of the capabilities and limitations of his or her aviation assets.

Rapidly changing tactical situations can increase the vulnerability level of the aviation portion to the point where the risk of deployment is greater than any possible gain. Conversely, aviation borne assets are those best able to maintain response capability with rapid geographical shifts in the tactical situation. (Obviously, none of this detracts from the need for each individual team leader and team member to have complete knowledge and make the best decisions possible within their own segment of the operation.)

For those special operations that are not routinely life threatening, aviation training conducted cooperatively between the aviation unit and the special ops team is still necessary. Special operations, by their very nature, tend to be non-routine and often infrequent. Beyond safety, training and standardization will ensure knowledge of problem areas, as well as task familiarity on the part of personnel, sufficient to provide the best chance of smooth, effective operations.

Aviation is unquestionably a valuable asset for special ops, but most special operations increase the hazards for aviation to one degree or another. Standards, regular training and preparation, generated cooperatively by aviation and the special ops unit, will lead to the most effective, safest possible results.