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Securing the Homeland
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with Lt. Raymond E. Foster (ret.)

Terrorism, safety and situational awareness

by Lt. Raymond E. Foster, LAPD (ret.), MPA
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When the first aircraft struck the World Trade Center, what were your thoughts? Did you think about terrorists? Or, was your first thought something more like “How could that happen?” The first crash left most people trying to figure out what human or mechanical error could have caused the crash. However, a little over 15 minutes later – and the instant Flight 175 came into view – we knew we were under attack. As the jet slammed into the South Tower of the World Trade Center, our view changed and the response of police and fire personnel to the WTC and the other incidents changed.

Our reaction changed because the additional information of the second aircraft altered our perception of the first crash. Our perceptions moved closer to reality because more data gave meaning to and enhanced our comprehension of what we were observing.

Situational awareness

“Situational awareness” was a term originally used to describe the tactical situation during aerial combat. While the literal term doesn’t go back as far as World War I, the idea surfaced then, when pilots first took to the sky in combat. At first, the term referred to the pilot’s ability to know where he was in relation to the enemy and the other pilots of his flight. In reality, that is only positional awareness. However, when pilots added their knowledge of aircraft capabilities and known battle tactics with positional awareness, they were able to interpret, comprehend and anticipate. The comprehension of observations is the essence of situational awareness.

Police officers use situational awareness daily. While it has obvious applications for street tactics, it likely is used most in the development of reasonable suspicion (RS) and probable cause (PC). Both RS and PC are an officer’s interpretation of observations based on their education, training and experience. Whenever you detain someone, conduct a warrantless search or make an arrest, you are practicing situational awareness. Just as you and I were able to make better arrests as we gained knowledge on the job, we also were safer. Our safety was enhanced because there is a predictive element to total situational awareness.

Situational awareness has three levels – perceiving critical factors, understanding those factors and finally understanding what those factors will cause to happen in the near future. Just as we
gained an edge over the common criminal element by education, training and experience, we can gain that edge over terrorists by enhancing our comprehension of what we observe as it relates to terrorism. We can protect our communities and ourselves with enhanced situational awareness of terrorism.

One of the most common delivery methods of explosives is through the use of a vehicle. Some of the indicators may be:

- Vehicles that have a strong chemical smell, or the scent of something burning coming from them;
- Signs of recent body work, especially of poor quality, or with patches welded to the cab or body of the truck;
- Extra fuel tanks or antennas, or recent signs of a reinforced suspension;
- Inappropriate license plates, misspelled artwork or badly executed stencil painting;
- Heavily tinted windows, particularly if used in an unusual manner (for example, if the front screen of a delivery truck is tinted); and
- Signs that the vehicle is heavily overloaded on its suspension.

**Know what terrorism is**

In the first article of this series, Terrorism: Crime or Asymmetrical Warfare, we noted that the “the definition of a crime dictates our response.” In that article we further explored the FBI’s definition of terrorism:

"Domestic terrorism refers to activities that involve acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any state; appear to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; to influence the policy of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and, occur primarily within the territory jurisdiction of the United States."

You will increase your situational awareness, or the ability to use your comprehension of the facts, to predict short-term future events by understanding the history and nature of terrorism.

[Read “Defining terrorism for law enforcement”]

**Know your beat**

If you received a radio call of a shooting on the southwest corner of Jefferson Boulevard and Central Avenue, you would have some positional awareness, but not much situational awareness. You would know the best route to get to the call, and probably the best way to approach, but little more. However, what if you knew the location was an apartment building rife with drug activity? Alternatively, what if you knew the location was a religiously affiliated daycare center? Either set of facts would add to your situational awareness, it would change the way in which you
handled your approach and the call.

Most of the literature for first responders on terrorism emphasizes the need to be aware of the critical infrastructure in your community. However, your definition of critical infrastructure may limit your situational awareness somewhat. As an example, the Critical Infrastructure and Key Assets: Definition and Identification report to Congress ultimately defined critical infrastructure as:

“The framework of interdependent network and systems comprising identifiable industries, institutions (including people and procedures), and distribution capabilities that provide a reliable flow of products and services essential to the defense and economic security of the United States, the smoothing function of government at all levels, and society as a whole.”

Based on this definition, bridges, chemical factories and government facilities, etc. are part of the critical infrastructure. However, given the purpose of terrorism, first responders should be aware of their community’s political, social and cultural infrastructure. A religiously affiliated daycare center probably doesn’t fall into the category of critical infrastructure, yet it would be part of your community’s social and cultural infrastructure and in today’s world a potential terrorist target.

**Know the groups, their goals, their tactics**

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<tr>
<th>Terrorist Planning Indicators</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Possession of extremist or radical literature;</td>
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<td>2. Interest in law enforcement tactics, yet not in law enforcement;</td>
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<td>3. Surveillance of critical infrastructure or political, cultural or social infrastructure in the community;</td>
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<td>4. Possession of or attempts to obtain surveillance or planning materials, i.e., maps, photographs, blueprints, cameras, surveillance equipment;</td>
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<td>5. Possession of or attempts to obtain materials for improvised explosive devices i.e., chemicals, timers, wires or other components;</td>
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<td>6. Possession of (or the attempt to obtain) fraudulent identification documents;</td>
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<td>7. The rental of, or attempt to rent, storage units or a living space for a large group of people;</td>
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<td>8. Economical and non-descript lifestyle;</td>
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<td>9. The abandonment of typical cultural identifiers such as facial hair or clothing;</td>
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<td>10. No interest in learning English; and,</td>
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<td>11. Relationships with suspicious groups.</td>
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**Note:** This checklist is by no means all-inclusive. It should be viewed as a place from which to start your discussion about counterterrorism planning.

Since 1996 the State Department has issued an annual report on patterns of global terrorism. Between 1996 and 2004, the varying reports list well over one hundred different foreign terrorist organizations. Furthermore, this number does not include the large number of domestic terrorist or potential domestic terrorist groups and individuals. Clearly, it is impossible for the first responder to have in-depth knowledge about all of the potential threats. Similarly, in Los Angeles it would be difficult to have an in-depth understanding of every gang; however, it would be possible to understand enough about gang members in order to increase your situational
awareness. Here, in order to increase our situational awareness, it is important to understand some overarching principles about terrorists:

- For the terrorist, the end justifies the means. The result is that no matter how bad the act, if the terrorist perceives the act as moving toward their goal, he or she does not consider the impact of the act on the individual or groups. Their only concern is the impact of the act on their end goal.

- The planning and execution of most terrorist acts seems to indicate that first responders are dealing with criminals who have an above-average intelligence and are tactically astute. Research indicates that many terrorist leaders come from middle-class families and are relatively well educated.

- A key point of terrorism is always publicity for the cause, through terror. Think of it this way – in war, the point of a mine field is to slow or stop enemy progression; with terrorism, the point of an improvised explosive device along a highway is to gain publicity for the cause.

- The target and the victim need not be the same. On September 11th, the victims who were killed or injured were not the targets. The U.S. Government was the target. This concept reinforces the idea that for every terrorist, the end justifies the means.

**Know current intelligence**

The current national system for a terrorist alert is often very general and requires the average first responder to dig a little deeper for information related to his or her agency. There have been, however, instances when the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has issued alerts that were specific enough to be used independently. An alert that says that financial institutions in a specific region should be in a higher state of preparedness is specific enough for first responders to take action. Indeed, DHS not only issues alerts, but general recommendations for action based on those alerts. Every first responder should have a good grasp of how a heightened alert impacts his or her assignment.

One of the problems with American law enforcement is that we tend to “stove-pipe” critical communications. That is, we send information up and down a specific chain of command, often failing a timely dissemination of the information to where it is most needed. You can work to short-circuit this by developing your own sources of information. Whether you subscribe to the Department of Defense e-mail briefings, the State Department e-mail advisories or any one of the great public sources of Open Source Intelligence, you should find a source of information that you continually and regularly consult for intelligence on the latest trends in terrorism.

Total situational awareness is gained through increased comprehension of what we observe. It results in a greater ability to make short-term predictions about what is going to happen and therefore make decisions regarding our response. Comprehension is gained through education, training and experience. If you attain total situational awareness, you will be better able to prevent, respond and apprehend.
About the author

Lt Raymond E. Foster, LAPD (ret.), MPA is author of *Police Technology* (Prentice Hall, July 2004), and co-author of *Leadership: Texas Hold ‘em Style* (Quill Driver Books, August 2006), *From NYPD to LAPD: An Introduction to Policing* (Prentice Hall, July 2007), over fifty articles on technology, policing, leadership and terrorism and a dozen educational Web sites like www.police-writers.com. Raymond can be reached at raymond@hitechcj.com or through his blog.

About ITT Night Vision’s Sponsorship of this Column

ITT Night Vision is sponsoring this column in order to facilitate information sharing across law enforcement around this important topic and to support law enforcement in their efforts to secure the homeland and better prepare for and respond to acts of terrorism.

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