



NTOA ACADEMY: The Professionalization of SWAT

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The NTOA is pleased to announce the formation of the NTOA Academy, created in partnership with the International Academy of Public Safety (IAPS). The NTOA Academy, “An Investment in Innovation, Education and the Future,” is an internationally blended and comprehensive educational program designed to prepare today’s tactical officers and policing leaders to succeed in a high-risk, ever-changing professional environment and to effectively meet the challenges of the future.

THE PROFESSION

Law enforcement’s image as a profession in the U.S. is in a state of turmoil and distress. Many in the general public hold a negative view of police, augmented by a barrage of negative media attention. Detractors support their view with a narrative of excessive police violence and abuse, the militarization of police units and departments, and the use of police as an oppressive arm of the government in certain communities. Although far from being true, the story has become commonly accepted over time, partly as a result of our police agencies’ inability to effectively counter it. Add in politics endemic to senior leadership of law enforcement agencies, and you get a difficult and complex problem.

SWAT, as a part of law enforcement, has been included in the negativity.

Here, there is some truth to the narrative, as evidenced by some clear debacles in the handling of extreme incidents. Whether due to poor decision-making, bad leadership or just being beyond the actual capabilities of the attending SWAT team, those pushing the negative viewpoint have been quick to use these events as evidence of law enforcement being “out of control.” Such incidents are actually quite rare and are the exception, not the rule. Thousands of extreme incidents and situations are successfully handled by SWAT teams every year, but because they end favorably, they are never heard about. And so the negative narrative leads public opinion.

Police agencies declare themselves as part of a profession of law enforcement, but is this true? Most academics define a profession as the following from BusinessDictionary.com: “Occupation, practice, or vocation requiring mastery of a complex set of knowledge and skills through formal education and/or practical experience. Every organized profession (accounting, law, medicine, etc.) is governed by its respective professional body.” Given such definitions, law enforcement often has difficulty being considered a profession by those outside of it. Law enforcement personnel are more often considered blue-collar workers rather than white-collar professionals. Given very few required

Professional: of, relating to, or connected with a profession.

Profession: a vocation requiring knowledge of some department of learning or science.

— Dictionary.reference.com

educational standards for entry-level through to executive level, it is easy to see where the difficulty lies.

True professions involve entry-level educational and vocational standards as well as ongoing requirements of specified performance. Also included are educational requirements for advancement to become a leader of the profession and to maintain membership among the profession’s ranks. Academicians are mixed as to whether law enforcement constitutes an actual profession and whether or not law enforcement officers can be considered professionals in the academic meaning of the word.

Several years ago, recognizing the negative situation and the growing issues with SWAT teams as a result of both unfavorable outcomes and anti-law enforcement sentiment, the National Tactical Officers Association (NTOA) initiated the first phase of its ambitious project to professionalize

SWAT. With the initial release of, and subsequent adjustments to, the National SWAT Standard (now titled “Tactical Response and Operations Standard”) the NTOA established a baseline for SWAT team performance. Supporting the standards was the development of the NTOA’s Critical Skills List of specific skill sets required of SWAT teams in order to be mission capable. Various members of influence in the NTOA then discussed how best to continue the effort and began discussing the concept of certification of teams and personnel.

The NTOA Academy will take the professionalization of SWAT to the next level.

The California Association of Tactical Officers (CATO) also recognized the need to professionalize SWAT. In 2014, CATO embarked on an enthusiastic effort to certify SWAT officers and agencies. CATO began doing the research necessary to build professional requirements for certification and quickly realized how large and resource-intensive the effort was going to be. Upon hearing the NTOA was embarking on the same journey, CATO recognized the value of collaboration and enthusiastically embraced combining efforts.

CATO had previously enlisted the assistance of Dr. Mitch Javidi, founder and president of the International Academy of Public Safety (IAPS) in Raleigh, North Carolina. Javidi had created an extensive law enforcement leadership academy based on online educational requirements. Upon hearing of the

CATO effort, Javidi offered to host it within his IT resources.

In the summer of 2015, the NTOA invited CATO and other state SWAT associations to a planning conference. Javidi was also invited to present a concept of how the agreement with CATO could be expanded to meet the NTOA concept as well. The two-day conference resulted in the development of roles, relationships and initial requirements leading to the NTOA becoming a national certifying entity for SWAT officers and agencies. Javidi and the IAPS offered to share resources to further the program. The attending state associations were asked to poll their members for acceptance of the concept. The result was overwhelmingly favorable.

The NTOA then held a strategy meeting at its annual conference in Salt Lake City, Utah, in August 2015. The concept was presented to the board and the board voted unanimously to implement the program. Shortly after the conference, the NTOA announced the creation of the NTOA Academy, the next phase of the professionalization of law enforcement tactical officers and units.

THE ACADEMY

The NTOA Academy will take the professionalization of SWAT to the next level. First, it will provide for the certification of SWAT team leaders and commanders. The leadership certification program will start in mid-2016. The curriculum consists of online education, resident courses and capstone project requirements.

The certification programs for SWAT instructors and operators will commence in mid-2017. Working groups are forming to build specific requirements, and more information will follow as this endeavor continues. Program pricing is

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also underway and will be announced at some point in the future.

Once the NTOA Academy is operational, graduating SWAT team leaders, instructors and operators will meet the academic definition of professionals, having educational and vocational requirements, a certification process and a review process for maintaining certification. The result will be less tactical debacles to fuel the negative police narrative, greater protection against litigation, highly improved tactical decision-making, and *actual* capability versus *perceived* capability of SWAT teams and personnel. Ergo, the professionalization of SWAT. ■

Please watch for more NTOA Academy information on our website, in our eNewsletters and by following us on social media.