

Safe Resolution of A Barricaded Suspect Call

Jef Behnken is a sergeant with the Burnsville, MN police department, and the team commander of the department's 16-member SWAT team. Burnsville is one of five neighboring agencies that belong to the South Metro Tactical Association, which in late 2007 acquired two Recon Scout robots in an effort to give their teams close-range tactical reconnaissance capabilities.

In September 2008, Burnsville received a call about an armed, suicidal female who was barricaded in a condominium complex and had threatened responding officers. According to Sergeant Behnken, when the SWAT team was called in, they immediately grabbed their Recon Scout.

"From day one, what we really liked about this robot was that you could just grab it and go, and it took less than ten seconds to deploy," says Behnken. "We had trained with the robot several times in 2008, so we knew exactly how our team would use it on calls like this. One of our first rules of thumb is that we do all we can before we put our officers in harm's way. This suspect had made threats to burn the building down and threatened to slit her wrists, so we took the situation very seriously. Our negotiators spent quite a while trying to talk with her, but they were not successful. We then introduced a Clear-Out gas canister, hoping that it would bring her out of the ground-floor condominium, but that too was unsuccessful."

Uncertain whether the suspect had taken her life or moved to another area of the residence, the SWAT team elected to use a non-lethal round to break out the curtained patio door to gain visual access into the environment. Behnken's team immediately found that the suspect had barricaded the door, leaving an opening only above the furniture that was piled in front of it.

"We knew that we had to get more information about the condition and location of the suspect before sending in our team, so I tossed the robot in through a small opening and began using the OCU (operator control unit) to explore the room," says Behnken. "All the while, our negotiators were continuing to try to contact her. As we moved the Recon Scout through the clutter, we could see there was nobody in the living room or the kitchen, and we could see the phone that she had used to talk to our negotiators. We used the robot to clear the entire place, except for the bathroom, which was closed up. The robot video let us see that she had stuffed towels under the door in an effort to stop the gas. We reinitiated negotiations with her,

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*—Sergeant Jef Behnken, tactical team leader,
Burnsville Police Department*

but she did not respond so we sent in our entry team, keeping the robot positioned at the bathroom door. Finding that the bathroom door was locked and barricaded we tried to breach the adjacent hallway wall. Almost immediately she came out the bathroom door holding 2 knives. When she did not respond to commands to drop the weapons, our officers Tasered her and safely took her into custody."

Throughout the situation Behnken had stationed himself outside the residence and used the OCU to clear the apartment to make sure certain areas were safe before his team entered. He then followed the entry team into the residence, using the OCU to scout ahead of them. Even with all the lights off in the residence, Behnken was viewing crystal clear images of the rooms. He believes that the robot enabled his team to be more confident about their movements and tactics, and helped resolve the situation more quickly. It also saved them a potentially large clean up expense.

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Burnsville SWAT now takes its robot on every operation. Each SWAT member has been trained in its operation, and they all know the protocols for using it.

"The robot enables us to make smart decisions as we go, and it is incredibly easy to use, says Behnken. "It is kept in my office and we just grab it and go."

Summary

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| Agency | • Burnsville Police Department, Burnsville, Minnesota. Population 60,220 |
| Challenge | • Resolving dangerous situations while limiting risk to the tactical team
• Conducting reconnaissance of barricaded environments in advance of the entry team |
| Solution | • Deploy a Recon Scout mobile reconnaissance robot to assist in clearing rooms and locating the suspect |
| Benefits | • Robot is very small; team can just grab it and go
• Robot can be thrown through a window or other small opening to gain access
• Tactical team leaders can explore an environment in advance of the entry team
• Provides clear, crisp video even in very low ambient light
• Reduces damage to property, and limits department liability |