

LINK-UP PROCEDURES

“Teach us how not to shoot each other” read the bullet comment on one of my Hostage Rescue critiques. I almost laughed and thought to myself, “I thought I did that.” I then started thinking of the times during live operations I was shot at by other friendly personnel and I got more serious, understanding the concern of the officer who wrote the comment. As a result, I added a “anti-fratricide” module on my team planning and integration day.

Usually during my week-long course of instruction, I have one or two incidents of friendly fire during multi-breach point exercises. The use of sim-munitions and live role players usually ramp up the adrenaline and the “fear” or apprehension factor. I have witnessed this first hand when an inexperienced or poorly trained assaulter tends to “lean” on a trigger and bypass the basic safety rules. How do we fix the problem? We must first look at our operational planning.

Planning

During my course of instruction, I require teams to execute multiple breach points, routinely during one hit (one per team). I require the Team Leaders and the Assault Force Commander to plan multiple breach points, link-up points, limits of advance, areas of responsibility and fields of fire. These areas must be addressed during our mission planning order.

First, if you use “template” plans that can be applied to most targets in either hostage rescue or high-risk warrants, you will learn one to two systems and get very good at them. Template plans require teams to have specific duties and areas of responsibility, such as entry, breach and hold or rake and break. Keeping teams in the same positions, allow them to get very good at their jobs and better understand the flow of the operation. Occasionally during training and routine missions, you can rotate teams to learn other positions so they do not become stagnant and complacent.

Next, tactics vary according to the mission. For example, high-risk warrants may require a methodical clearing plan with fewer breach points than a hostage rescue scenario. You might want to secure the target first on a high-risk warrant and then methodically clear at your own pace if you do not know where the subject is, pinning the rear of the target with a blocking team.

Hostage rescue requires multi-breach points, preferably close to the hostage taker(s), if their location is known. This becomes more hazardous because speed is important in HR operations and teams will naturally bump into each other in pursuit of the hostage taker(s). The hostage taker(s) in this case is the variable and they will dictate the speed and flow of your assault. It can easily become a free flow operation versus a methodical clearing process.

The Link-up

Prior to entering the target, each team member and Team Leader will know the danger areas listed above. They will understand that link-up points are dangerous and how to cover them. This is especially true for “rake and break” teams who clean out windows and port them with weapons. They must be alert and aware that an entry officer can dynamically enter the room at any time.

Being alert is not enough. They must have an “anticipation mindset.” Though link-up signals are covered in the planning section, it takes experience and a calm head to conduct a link-up. The officer covering a link-up point needs to look and listen for the approaching team. After executing numerous training and live raids, you should become aware of the sound an approaching team makes. They have a certain flow and sound when entering a room, they use the same verbiage as you when securing a room, when approaching a closed door, etc. This should signal you that a planned or unplanned link-up is imminent.

Link-ups can be planned down to the degree of who is holding and who is pushing through to the other team. I have seen many types of signals used over the years from index cards to “baby” chemlights. I prefer a combination of white light and verbal. I believe that you should cover a link-up point at a low ready until you make a face-to-face recognition of a fellow team member. All this goes back to planning, with the requirement of TL’s to plan who is covering the link-up point, who will open the door and signals to be used when executing the link-up.

Problems: The “Fear Factor” and Combat Mindset

We often wonder how fast is fast or “am I fast enough.” These questions will cause your mind to race and often cause officers to take short cuts to make up for a perceived lack of speed. They may bypass the mechanical safety and raise their weapon higher than normal into almost a firing position. An already weak scanning sequence does not help matters.

I have witnessed officers failing to look at the whole person first, key on a weapon, then follow the weapon to center mass and let the round go, “POW.” Many times they fire one round and their brain catches up and they then see the whole picture. How do we fix this and build confidence in our abilities?

Safety and Training Equals Confidence

We must first begin with proper range training and build confidence in ourselves and our weapon systems. Use of the mechanical safety must be stressed along with the proper use of cover. Our primary weapon should be kept at a low ready when possible so we can properly discriminate targets and not try and clear through our weapon sight systems.

As for cover, we should always minimize our exposure when covering a link-up point or a closed door. Also, closed doors are danger areas and are subject to being shotgun or explosively breached. When possible, cover a closed door from behind cover or at the best possible angle to prevent you being struck by flying debris. Generally, shotgun breaching rounds will only cause the bolt mechanism to sting when it hits you, but explosive charges are not so forgiving.

Further, we must be aware that a closed door will open and telegraph movement, giving us added time to react. When covering, we must look for common recognition features such as Kevlar helmets and body armor. We must look at the whole picture first. Finally, we must be continually alert and expect to take fire. Be mentally prepared for this. Also, by distancing ourselves from the breach/link-up point, we expand the reactionary gap and give the entering officer time to discriminate see that it is other officers he has encountered.

Worse Case Scenario: You Take Friendly Fire

You have reached your limit of advance and are covering your link-up point. Suddenly, you sense and then see movement and you take fire from a friendly officer. What do you do? Maintain your cover and seek more if necessary. Have an alternate position in mind and be prepared to tuck in tight. Always seek cover that will stop bullets.

Next, start talking, more like yelling. Try and get the officers attention and if that does not work due to the distances involved, get on the radio and make a net call. Again, be prepared to relocate if necessary.

Finally, plan and rehearse link-up procedures in training and continually refine them. They are a danger area that needs to be understood and rehearsed during all mission planning cycles.