

Preliminary Findings on VA Tech Shootings

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Since the shootings at Virginia Tech (VT) on Monday, 16 April 07, news media and experts alike have been expressing opinions which are critical of the response to both by VT and Blacksburg police. Accusations of incompetence and negligence were being expressed on air within an hour of these attacks breaking as news stories, and even as the news agencies believed shooting was still going on.

In order to attempt to reduce the speed with which these conclusions are being drawn, and the degree to which they are already taking on the mantle of absolute truth, I am writing on behalf of myself, and the two other members of our group, as well as the Archangel Group with which I am employed. It is our hope that some preliminary information will begin to help correct the record on this matter, or at least slow down the dissemination of erroneous information and baseless conclusions. Five days after the shootings I traveled to VT along with Deputy Chris Hays, SWAT operator, sniper and instructor with the Orange County (CA) Sheriff's Office; and Capt. Joe Bail with the Chester (PA) police department. Deputy Hays is a former Marine sergeant and sniper, is a current sniper instructor, and veteran of the operation in Mogadishu of Blackhawk Down fame. Capt. Bail is the overall commander of both the SWAT and dive teams in a jurisdiction that sits on the edge of Philadelphia. Though I am not a law enforcement officer, between the two of them, there is close to 50 years of law enforcement experience.

Our efforts in traveling to VT were along the same as those that took me to Beslan, Russia in September 2004, including two follow-up trips; having been accompanied by Capt. Bail on the final trip to debrief Russian Special Forces. That purpose was to obtain as much accurate information as possible on the tactical situation confronted, and the operation that was ultimately launched to eliminate the threat. We pursued the identical purpose at VT. In these efforts, Archangel paid the majority of the costs associated with this evaluation, but neither Capt. Bail nor Deputy Hays received any compensation for their time. Our sole purpose was to assess and evaluate the tactical response of those two departments under the totality of circumstances with which they were confronted at the time. Our ultimate goal was to determine as many lessons to be learned as possible, so that all law enforcement might be better prepared for attacks that are yet to come; a reality we think everyone recognizes. No one from any political department, government office or law enforcement agency requested this of us, nor do we have a relationship with any of the involved departments and agencies. As Capt. Bail is a longtime consultant to Archangel, and Deputy Hays has long been known to us for his expertise, they ultimately agreed to go forward with this as an Archangel project, under their belief that Archangel's ongoing efforts to provide valuable training to law enforcement would help get important information to the law enforcement community at large. We were all committed to entering this assessment with an objective mindset, free from influence of any outside

agency that could be claimed to possess a political agenda, or have a vested interest in the outcome.

We are now in the process of preparing a detailed written report on the tactical aspect of the VT shootings. This report will be limited solely to an assessment of the tactical situation and response. Due to the narrowness of its focus, many issues already being debated in public – such as university emergency warning systems, psychological treatment of people like Cho, loopholes in gun laws, etc. – will not be addressed. However, some aspects of collateral issues do impact on the tactical analysis, and will be discussed only to that degree. As well, a thorough review of national legal standards on law enforcement response and training will be included. Though I am an attorney, this is a field with which I am not an expert. Nationally-known attorney Mark Baganz, Esq. – himself a former police officer, and current expert in this field as well as serving on the advisory board of Police Marksman magazine – has agreed to provide the legal evaluation. This will also ensure objectivity in the legal review of this situation by an established expert.

Under normal circumstances, none of us would have been comfortable releasing preliminary findings before we had the opportunity to complete an exhaustive investigation and analysis of all that we learned, and put it into a detailed report. However, the conclusions drawn by our group as a result of the information we obtained at VT are of such steadfastness that we feel a duty to release at least some of them at this time. This is driven to a large degree by the extreme amount of negative coverage by the news media. Of particular concern is the large number of experts offering opinions of incompetence on the part of the Virginia Tech shootings' responding agencies. From the beginning we were of the opinion that insufficient information was actually known for anyone with expert credentials to render any opinion whatsoever. It is clear to us now that none of those experts had taken the time to travel to VT or interview any of the people who were present, particularly the Norris Hall attack where 32 people were killed. Certainly, we didn't see a single one of them during the full week we were there.

Our report will state that from the perspectives of law enforcement preparation and training, joint operations ability and experience, handling of the first shooting and tactical response to the second attack at Norris Hall, as well as the manner in which the recovery phase of the Norris Hall operation was managed, that not only did the two initially responding agencies not fail in any way, but that it would be difficult, if not impossible, for any agencies to have performed better. We believe that when the complete “facts” about the VT shootings are ultimately revealed – we expect much to come from the Governor’s panel, with which we had no affiliation - both the VT and Blacksburg police departments will be held up as models of interagency training and operability; response; investigation; speed of tactical response to an active shooter situation; integration of tactical teams; medical response and triage; transportation of wounded to hospitals; and the searching and securing of an entire area of a very large university campus. When the true elapsed time periods are understood – from first 911 call, to emergency radio contact to SWAT, to response, movement to the attack site, organization and coordination of tac teams, breaching of the building, and speed of movement through the building to the

shooter - it will be universally recognized that it would be almost impossible for any unit to have handled the operation with greater speed or professionalism.

Within a very short period of time other area agencies had been contacted and were in place. The Virginia State Police responded to a truly impressive degree and were actively involved in all law enforcement duties from that time forward. Numerous agencies dedicated substantial time providing a great – and much appreciated – presence for comfort and safety of the students. By our last day in Blacksburg we spoke to a number of students, each one of whom informed us that the student body was circulating a petition that already had several thousand signatures, attesting to their belief that the police performed extremely well and that they had the utmost confidence in them for the future. There will be important lessons to be learned from this tragedy, and both Blacksburg and VT PDs have already been working hard to be better for the next threat to their citizens. However, no such lessons will detract from the courage and dedication they showed in responding to the worst mass murder our nation has seen.

Two years ago, after the ten hour battle to retake the Beslan School in Russia, media and experts from all over the world were attacking the performance of the Russian Special Forces. Only one operator from the British SAS was willing to appear on world television and say: “I don’t know if any unit in the world could have done better.” The men and women of the Virginia Tech and Blacksburg police departments have earned the same being said of them. At this time, it is our opinion that many in the news media, and many law enforcement experts who rendered premature opinions, have done a tremendous disservice to law enforcement in general, and a great injustice to the officers from Blacksburg and Virginia Tech.

Should anyone be interested in an electronically transmitted copy of Archangel's report, when completed, please send a one line request via email, including your name, rank/title, agency and contact information. All requests should be sent from an official law enforcement, government or military email address, to rena@circon.org. There will be no charge for this report to anyone. The current deadline for its completion is 30 August 2007.

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