

Lessons Learned From Beslan PART TWO

Preparing For The Inevitable

What American Law Enforcement Must Be Ready For

By John Giduck

Between the recent bombings in London and one year anniversary of the terrorist atrocity at the Beslan Middle School in Russia, many people are re-evaluating the threat of terrorist attacks against soft targets here in the U.S. The London attacks were horrible enough, forcing policemen who had rarely carried a firearm to not only bear instruments of deadly force, but to do so under “shoot to kill” orders. Still, the bombings in the UK have been like many other terror attacks around the world: unexpected detonations that were over before anyone realized it, leaving professionals and civilians alike with little more to do than provide medical care and clean up the blast sites.

With this type of attack the fear comes later: “Should we use mass transit?” “Should we walk down the street past cars that could contain bombs?” “Should we even venture out?” But the preferred tactic of terrorists is the siege, where an entire nation holds its collective breath hour after gut-wrenching hour, fearing the outcome everyone knows to be virtually inevitable. This happened in the Ma’alot school massacre in Israel in 1974 when 21 children were executed, and at the Munich Olympics two years earlier. It happened at the Nord-Ost Theater in Moscow in October 2002. Most recently, it happened in Beslan, for when you seize a school, you take an entire country hostage.

When the Beslan siege first happened I recognized that with the Arabization of the Chechen War, and Usama bin Laden’s own instructors and commanders now calling many of the shots in terrorist assaults throughout Russia, this would serve as the blueprint for a similar attack on a U.S. school. After 15 years working, going to school, living, and training with Special Forces units in Russia, I was certain that I could reach the school quickly. Using years-long relationships there I was able to gain critical information for our tactical teams and patrolmen, to help them prepare for such an event on our own soil.

At no time in America have we ever confronted a true terrorist siege, much less one of the proportions of Beslan. Despite the Russian government’s official number of hostages being 1,181, members of Russia’s elite Spetsnaz (Special Forces) units have recently informed me they now believe that number to be closer to 1,300. What we do know is that there were 49 terrorists armed to the teeth with automatic assault rifles and under-barrel grenade launchers, belt fed machine guns, grenades, IEDs, and RPGs. They had sniper rifles, night vision and body armor. During the 52 hours of the standoff 21 of the largest teenage boys and men taken hostage were executed, another eight people, including a security guard and police officer, were killed in and outside the school. Young girls and women were raped relentlessly, at times with the barrels of guns.

Over the day long battle it took to win back the school and save as many hostages as possible, a great many mistakes were made. As well, a great many things were done right. From both of these categories, American law enforcement - particularly American

SWAT teams – has much it can learn, so that we might be better prepared when the horror comes to pay us a visit.

There is nothing about the experiences of U.S. law enforcement that has prepared our brave men and women for a true international terrorist siege involving dozens, if not hundreds, of hostages. Our tactical units are largely prepared for barricade situations most typically involving a lone, distraught man holding an estranged wife and children hostage. On rare occasion a bank robbery may go bad, stranding two criminals inside a building with a dozen or so hostages. In neither instance are such circumstances part of the planning of the perpetrators. Negotiators rely on the proven fact that hostage-takers seldom want hostages and will look to release them fairly quickly. The truth of this is borne out by the number of rounds most SWAT snipers deploy with in our country. As I speak across America on Beslan I always ask the tactical team members how many bullets their snipers carry. An average range is anywhere from 10 to 30, with 40 being high. The greatest number I have heard is 120, and that is carried by the snipers of a unit that suffered a devastating catastrophe in years past. But in a situation like Beslan, where an all-out battle occurs, those 120 rounds would give a sniper only four minutes of combat capability. In a ten hour firefight, that would leave him impotently watching his friends and teammates being shot down while attempting to cross open ground, or while fighting terrorists inside the school, for nine hours and 56 minutes.

When confronting an international terrorist siege, American police have to recognize that they will no longer be peace officers administering the law to a civilian population, but soldiers in a battle against trained and combat experienced enemy combatants. It will be a war not a crime scene, and they will have to be ready to fight it as a war. In the Nord-Ost Theater siege Russia's elite Alpha and Vypel counter-terror commandos stormed the building after administering a nerve gas. Not everyone was knocked out, and hostages were streaming out of the doors. When the soldiers entered the theater they found 25 female suicide bombers in their seats with their eyes closed, hands clutching wire detonators. It would have taken nothing more than a quick tug on those wires for a chain reaction of bombs to go off. Each received a bullet to the head as soon as the men were in range.

This is the same type of "shoot to kill" rule of engagement the British were forced to implement recently. But in the U.S., police are restricted by department policy, common law, statutory limitations, fear of liability, fear of criminal prosecution and fear of adverse news media coverage. They must make every effort to affect an arrest absent a clear and imminent indication on the part of the *suspect* to use deadly or extreme force. At both Beslan and Nord-Ost, any hesitation on the part of the government forces battling the terrorists would have resulted in far greater numbers of hostages and rescuers killed, maybe all of them.

It is for these reasons that I have been advocating for U.S. law enforcement receiving a federal grant of immunity for any actions it takes in responding to an international terrorist attack on our soil. It took but a couple of days after the second wave of London bombings before the family of one slain man was threatening litigation. Our police

cannot be allowed to hesitate in such circumstances, to worry about being fired, demoted, or investigated. Our negotiators cannot be allowed to worry about the fallout of beheaded hostages when a terrorist demand is refused. Living with the horror of what they experience will be punishment enough. And our assault teams cannot stop for one instant before putting rounds into the heads of terrorists they find inside a building, even if they are women.

American SWAT teams must begin adapting their training to this environment now. This is the worst that any terrorists could throw at us, and if American police are ready for that, they are ready for anything. Assault teams must carry far more ammunition and water, and logistical lines must be created to ferry even more to them over the course of an hours-long battle. Each department must identify the likely soft targets within its jurisdiction and have the principals of those sites prepare kits for them containing floor plans, diagrams and tactical videotape walkthroughs. Our approach to negotiations must be revamped. Empathizing and active listening skills will be ineffective against terrorists trained to anticipate such efforts. Police negotiators must also be psychologically prepared to deal with a number of executed hostages in response to delays or missed deadlines, and sometimes simply as a show of power. Understand that some hostages will be murdered early on. It is part of their game plan, and they will follow it. There is nothing you can do to save everyone. As the Russians told me, each of the hostages is a short term prisoner on his way to execution. If any one of them walks out alive, it is only because of what the police did.

American police need increased breaching ability, allowing assault teams to enter through walls rather than obvious doors and windows. Coming up through floors and down through roofs are all part of Russian tactical planning. To accomplish this, bomb techs must be completely integrated into SWAT teams. The use of gas must be explored and developed. Even if terrorists have gas masks, fewer hostages die from bombs and guns if they are all asleep, and even a small child is hard to hold up as a human shield if unconscious.

Tactical teams must train extreme close quarters combat, for that is how such a battle will occur. You will not be afforded the luxury of killing from distance. Defensive tactics must take the form of realistic hand-to-hand combat, eliminating the myths of head high kicking and Brazilian groundfighting as combat effective. With guns and bombs going off all around, Beslan was hardly the place to be found lying on one's back, legs wrapped tightly around an enemy. And with floors covered in bodies, blood and rubble, you would not have wanted to be caught with one foot in the air. These same hand-to-hand combat skills must be integrated with the use of both handguns and assault rifles. Our police commandos must be well trained, and psychologically prepared to kill, and to kill a lot. There will be no arrests; the terrorists will not allow it. As one top Russian Special Forces commander told me in the aftermath of the Beslan siege: "American police must prepare for the fact there are only two guaranteed results when this happens in the U.S. There will be a battle, and people will die."

Similarly, American police must look to the use of helicopters and other non-traditional delivery systems. They must be prepared for a deluge of parents and spectators, as well as newsmen. Their counter-intelligence skills must be up to par with the terrorist cells that will be hidden in the teeming crowds passing information to those inside via cell phones. Every police department must already know how it will contact relevant federal agencies, sister jurisdictions and the military. If you have experts in your area with expertise in foreign languages, religions and geo-political affairs, they must be located now. As well, every member of the assault teams must be properly equipped, including such basic things as boots with laces tucked in and taped, and bodybags.

In *Terror At Beslan: A Russian Tragedy With Lessons For America's Schools*, I have attempted to provide information on how these terrorists are trained, as well as a complete tactical analysis of what they did at Beslan, and how the government responded. What went right, what went wrong and why, is exhaustively detailed. Recognizing that the hostage-takers in Russia followed the al Qaeda training manuals to the letter, it is important information for everyone in America who puts a badge on his chest and straps a gun to his hip every day. Sooner or later, it will happen.

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