



# Minimum safety and tactical equipment for SWAT dog handlers

By Brad Smith

**I**t is critically important that dog handlers who deploy with SWAT are able to obtain the safety and tactical equipment they need. Many handlers have ventured into the field with their SWAT team for years without the appropriate and critical safety equipment that is, unfortunately, not required by their agencies.

Some handlers report that when they request safety and tactical equipment they are told they do not need it because they are not technically a part of the SWAT team. When reminded that the K9s and handlers have been deploying with their SWAT team for many years, supervisors often counter with concerns about budgets or remarks about past practices and resistance to change.

Dog handlers are often portrayed in well-respected law enforcement publications and in the media wearing

little, if any, of the safety and tactical equipment worn by the rest of the team. These depictions make it even more challenging for handlers. Case in point: News footage of a real SWAT deployment showed a SWAT team searching a residential neighborhood for a suspect

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who had shot and killed a patrol officer in central California after an armed bank robbery. As any good SWAT team should, the team had a handler and his dog assisting them in the search.

The SWAT team looked very professional and well-prepared in full safety and tactical gear: Kevlar helmets, ballistic or loadbearing vests, protective masks, goggles, gloves, camouflage uniforms and shoulder weapons with all the latest gadgets. However, the K9 handler was not wearing *any* safety or tactical equipment; he was just in his K9 uniform with soft body armor.

Another example: A SWAT team deployed a chemical agent into a residence. If the suspect did not surrender, the next step of the team's plan was to use the dog to search the location before the SWAT team made entry. When the chemical agent was deployed, the



handler did not have a protective mask and was wearing only her K9 uniform and soft body armor. Luckily for her, she was located on the upwind side of the location and was not overcome by the chemicals.

The suspect surrendered shortly after the chemical agent was deployed. If the suspect had not surrendered, the handler would have borrowed a Kevlar helmet and protective mask that had expired in 1997 before making entry.

It should go without saying that handlers who deploy with SWAT must be issued, at a minimum, a Kevlar helmet, a protective mask and a tactical vest with different pocket configurations to suit

their deployment needs. Training on the use of the equipment should be properly conducted, and it is then up to the handler to train with the new tactical gear to become proficient and familiar with it.

### STANDARDS FOR K9 HANDLERS

California POST has recommended training standards for K9s that deploy with SWAT which reads as follows: “SWAT K9 handlers should be provided with appropriate SWAT-specific safety and communications equipment appropriate to the assigned tactical mission.”

NTOA published safety guidelines for K9 handlers in a 2003 article in this journal. However, standards have not yet been formally included in the NTOA SWAT Standard document, first released in 2009. As a living document, the NTOA Standard underwent a revision process and was re-released in 2011. It is anticipated that the next revision process will result in the inclusion of K9 standards into the NTOA SWAT Standard document.

As the NTOA Canine Section Chair, please direct any recommendations you may have concerning K9 SWAT standards to me, or to any member of the NTOA Board of Directors, for consideration during the next revision process.

### CONCLUSION

For those who need more help convincing their agency to properly equip K9 handlers, imagine the firestorm that

### PATROL OFFICERS

When looking for violent or armed suspects, there will certainly be times when SWAT is called out, but with today’s budget issues, many supervisors rely on current or past SWAT operators who are working patrol to get the job done. Because of this, patrol officers, too, need to be properly equipped with at least the minimum safety and tactical equipment, including a Kevlar helmet, soft body armor and a protective mask.

Even when the SWAT team is activated, there are times when patrol officers are required to maintain their perimeter position due to manpower shortage or budget issues. When SWAT deploys a chemical agent, these patrol officers need to be properly equipped with a protective mask so they do not need to abandon their post to avoid the chemicals.

When most people hear the phrases *high risk* or *tactical deployment* they think of SWAT operations. But what do we call it when patrol officers are deployed on a search for a suspect who is wanted for a violent crime or is armed? Do we refer to this as a low to medium risk tactical operation since it is “only” patrol officers conducting the search? Should those patrol officers not be issued the safety equipment that can save their lives? //

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**...imagine the firestorm that would occur during a civil lawsuit if a handler was injured or killed during a SWAT deployment or high risk patrol deployment. What if the family of the downed officer discovered their loved one had not been issued the same safety equipment worn by the rest of the search team?**

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would occur during a civil lawsuit if a handler was injured or killed during a SWAT deployment or high risk patrol deployment. What if the family of the downed officer discovered their loved one had not been issued the same safety equipment worn by the rest of the search team?



No officer or specialized unit is more important than another; we are all vulnerable to attack. The initial investment in properly equipping K9 officers pales in comparison to potential future litigation or loss of life. //

**Editor's note:** To review the NTOA SWAT Standard document online, a link is provided on our Web site at [www.ntoa.org](http://www.ntoa.org). Contact information for the NTOA Board of Directors is available at [ntoa.org/site/about/directors.html](http://ntoa.org/site/about/directors.html).

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Corporal Brad Smith (ret.)** was a canine handler and trainer for the West Covina (CA) PD for 25 years and a SWAT dog handler for 18 years. He is NTOA's Canine Section Chair and a subject matter expert for the California Association of Tactical Officers. Cpl. Smith designed and implemented S.K.I.D.D.S./CATS, a K9 SWAT and tactical school and he is also the owner of Canine Tactical Operations and Consulting. He can be reached at [Topdogwck1@aol.com](mailto:Topdogwck1@aol.com) or 626-523-4028.

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