



## CROSSHAIRS

# ATF's Special Response Team

By Thomas Murray

Photos by Kirk Clarke, ATF Visual Information Branch



How can a federal law enforcement agency with less than 3,000 special agents manage the inherent risk of investigating and apprehending some of the country's most violent criminals? This was the question our agency set out to answer more than a decade ago. It led to the development of one of the most unique tactical programs in the country.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) is a law enforcement agency within the United States Department of Justice dedicated to reducing violent crime and protecting the public. ATF enforces federal laws relating to firearms, explosives and arson. The bureau routinely partners with other law enforcement agencies

investigating illegal firearms trafficking, armed felons, bombings and arson-for-profit. The ATF Special Response Team (SRT) program was created to provide agents in the field with a full-service tactical team during high-risk enforcement operations.

### Background

The SRT program began as a conglomeration of field division part-time teams in the early 1990s that varied in personnel, procedures, equipment and training. In 1997, the program was restructured into five regional, part-time teams with increased funding for training and equipment. The benefits were quickly recognized, but the operational and training tempo

### SRT members approach structure during hostage rescue FTX in Tampa, Fla.

strained the program's resources. Finally, in 1999, each team was staffed with a full-time SRT supervisor and five tactical team members.

Today, ATF's SRT program has four teams with full- and part-time members who conduct high-risk enforcement operations throughout the country. The four teams, located in Detroit, Los Angeles, Dallas and Washington, DC, have approximately 150 full- and part-time members. The program consists of three sections: tactical, negotiations and medical support. The Critical Incident Management Branch, through the pooled resources of special agents, civilian experts and support personnel, manages the program at the headquarters level. The program is continually evolving to meet the needs of the bureau.

### Operations

The SRT conducts approximately 125 high-risk enforcement operations a year, including search and arrest warrants, buy-busts, protection details and high-risk vehicle stops and surveillances. The SRT receives mission requests from individual field divisions in support of their investigations. Once a mission is approved, an SRT advance team meets with the case agent and field division management to set mission parameters, obtain target intelligence, assess resource requirements and begin operational planning. The advance team will return to the operational area several days

**(top) SRT K-9 and handler during high-risk vehicle stop exercise.**

**(bottom) SRT members conducting high-risk vehicle stop exercise in Tampa, Fla.**

before the mission commences to finalize planning, briefing materials and coordination. The majority of SRT personnel arrive one day before the operation for briefings, rehearsals and inspections. At the conclusion of the mission, team members conduct debriefings before returning to their home offices.

The SRT has several unique considerations when developing operational plans. Variables include geography, logistics, medical support, operational security and coordination with other law enforcement agencies. SRT missions are conducted in geographical settings that range from urban to extremely rural. For example, during a one-week period in October 2001, the SRT conducted a buy-bust operation in Miami and served search warrants in rural Alaska. Because of the vast distances the SRT must often travel, logistics are always a concern. The SRT is responsible for coordinating the movement of personnel, equipment and medical support while maintaining operational security for each mission. They also work closely with other law enforcement agencies to organize joint operations and tactical support.

## Training

When the SRT program began, most divisional teams received training from police departments in their areas. ATF owes a debt of gratitude to the numerous state and local police departments and officers who have assisted the program. After the SRT became regional, the largest obstacle to overcome was standardizing operational procedures and training. For more than eight years, the divisional teams applied the tactical philosophies and styles prevalent in their geographical areas.



For example, West Coast teams implemented standard operating procedures and training regimens patterned after Southern California law enforcement agencies while East Coast teams often trained with eastern seaboard departments.

This lack of standardization created numerous team interoperability problems. The program relies heavily on its part-time members whose availability for routine activations often depends on their home-office workloads. SRT activations usually involve a mix of different full- and part-time members, sometimes from other teams. Tactical members must be able to function in varying stack positions and assignments, whether operating with their assigned team or another. Also, large-scale operations often involve multiple SRTs working in coordination and close proximity to each other. As the program progressed, the need for standardization could no longer be ignored.





Once the bureau committed itself to creating standardized SRT operational procedures and training, a two-year plan was instituted to develop common operational and training philosophies. In 2001, SRT leadership worked out the final details for standard operating procedures, equipment, lesson plans and training.

Today, all four teams attend standardized one-week quarterly training classes at various sites around the country. Tactical members train to perform in differing stack positions and assignments. Topics include firearms, movement, breaching, barricade incidents, hostage rescue, vehicle assaults, command and control, rural operations and first aid. Quarterly training is also used for annual re-certifications in less lethal, chemical munitions, diversionary devices and self-defense. The headquarters Special Operations Training Branch sponsors SRT quarterly training and basic schools. In 2002, training locations ranged from the Blackwater Training Center in North Carolina, to Camp Pendleton, California.

## Selection

SRT members are volunteers selected from around the country who continue to serve as criminal

investigators. Applicants must pass the SRT firearms qualification, physical fitness test and a panel interview to be eligible. Upon successful completion of the two-week basic school, they join their teams as part-time members and must complete a one-year probationary period. SRT members who successfully complete the probation are eligible to apply for full-time positions once they reach the federal GS-13 level. Applicants are forewarned about the required commitment for program admission. SRT members routinely travel four weeks a year for training and another four-to-five weeks for operations. Full-time team members can expect to double and even triple the amount of time they will spend in training, operations and required travel. Needless to say, only the most committed and assiduous members are selected for this duty.

## Negotiations

The negotiations section of the SRT is staffed with special agents from the field. Negotiators attend a two-week introductory school, semi-annual training and must pass both handgun and physical fitness qualifications. They deploy on most SRT operations and are routinely dispatched to search and arrest warrants assisting with intelligence, command post functions

## SRT members secure building after Hostage-Rescue exercise.

and negotiations. They are usually positioned with the SRT supervisor at the edge of the inner perimeter and prepared to move forward if necessary.

## Medics

The Operational Support Medic program is staffed with special agents who are certified as tactical emergency medical technicians. Tactical medics deploy with the SRT on all activations. Because the SRT travels throughout the country, medics are required to conduct detailed contingency planning and coordination for local assistance. ATF medics support the entire bureau and often assist other programs and field divisions during training and enforcement operations.

## Forward observers

A select group of SRT members also serve as forward observers. These specially trained members provide advanced surveillance, intelligence and long-rifle coverage capabilities during SRT operations.

## Tactical K-9

In spring 2003, the SRT developed a tactical K-9 section to enhance safety during operations. SRT members selected as handlers attend long and arduous training along with their new K-9 partners. Already, the SRT K-9 has enhanced operational safety and success by locating hidden suspects that were attempting to avoid capture during search and arrest warrants.

## Support

The SRT receives tremendous support from other components inside and outside the bureau.

The Technical Operations Branch provides electronic surveillance, technical countermeasures and other logistical support. The Radio Communications Branch assists with secure wireless communications, providing the program with equipment that ranges from handheld radios to portable repeaters. The U.S. Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement provides rotor and fixed-winged aircraft during activations. Their recent assistance to ATF in support of the “Beltway Sniper” investigation in the Washington, D.C., area proved invaluable to both surveillance and communications.

During large-scale operations, the bureau can deploy a Critical Incident Management Response Team (CIMRT) that provides a comprehensive command and support structure to coordinate activities. CIMRT personnel include representatives from the SRT,

investigations, intelligence, legal, public information, technical support and an incident commander who oversees the entire operation.

## Equipment

The SRT employs the standard assortment of tactical equipment used by most SWAT programs. Basic gear includes ballistic shields, breaching tools, mirrors, search cameras and dedicated less-lethal systems. The SRT program has adopted the Colt M4 rifle and Sig Sauer .40 caliber pistol as standard issue. The Colt M4 is equipped with the EOTech holographic sight and Surefire flashlight. Other specialty firearms are available for specific mission requirements.

## Conclusion

How can a federal law enforcement agency with less than 3,000 special agents manage the inherent risk of investigating and apprehending

some of the country’s most violent criminals? Answer: SRT. Today the Bureau’s Special Response Team is one of the most operationally active tactical programs in the federal government with a proven record of success in supporting numerous routine and high-profile investigations. Standardization has led to increased team interoperability and integration of the tactical, negotiations and medical components. Rigorous standards and training have significantly enhanced the program. But when all is said and done, the program’s success is due to the selfless service of its members, past and present.

## About the author

*Thomas Murray has served as a special agent for 10 years and was a member of the ATF Special Response Team V. He currently serves as the SRT program manager in Washington.*

