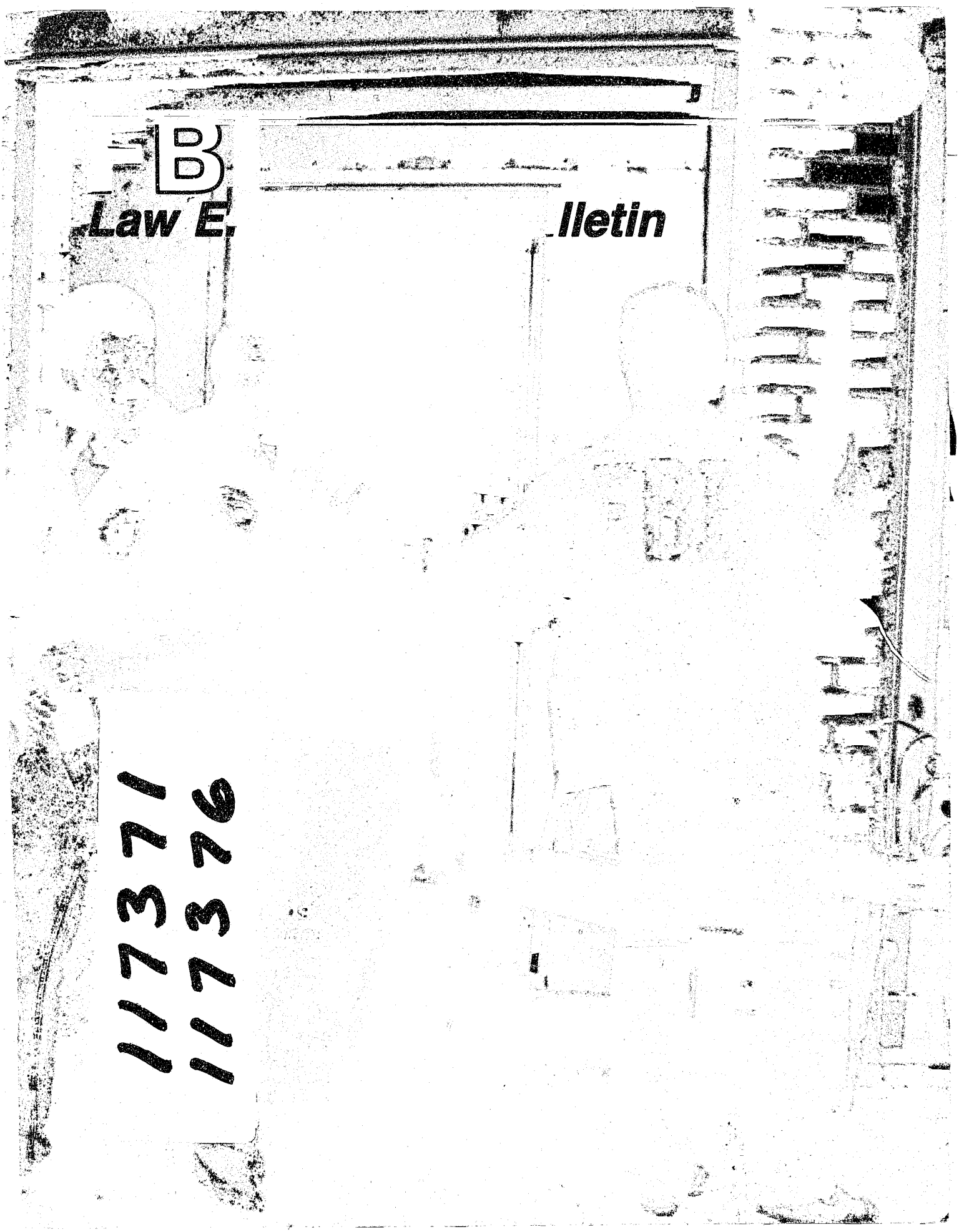

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A Guide for First Responders to Hostage Situations

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Imagine that you have been on routine patrol for several hours when the dispatcher reports a silent alarm indicating a robbery in progress at a savings and loan association. Since you are only 2 blocks away, you respond to the call. As you cautiously stop about a half block from the front entrance, watching for signs of unusual activity, a lone male carrying a shotgun runs from the building. He starts in your direction, then freezes, wide-eyed, as he spots your patrol car. Looking around, you realize the old clunker next to you is probably his getaway car. You draw your weapon and assume a position of cover; he turns and runs back into the savings and loan. When the screams of panic from inside die down, you hear a raspy male voice yell out, "Hey, you out there! Any stupid moves on your part and these people in here will get it! Do you hear me?" While reaching for the radio mike, you can't help but think, "What would Dirty Harry do now?"

The first 15 to 45 minutes are the most dangerous time in a hostage crisis (excluding a rescue attempt). According to Spaulding, the average crisis management team response time is 45 minutes to 1 hour.[1] Therefore, the most crucial moments of this situation are in your hands, the first officer on the scene.

Although we are not recommending the first responding officer begin negotiations, it may be appropriate to initiate contact with the subject in order to assess the situation and gain intelligence. Further, the subject may, on his own, initiate an ongoing dialog with you.

This article will provide guidelines for responding to that situation. Since the majority of these crimes are committed by males,[2] the masculine pronoun will be used to refer to the subject throughout this article.

INITIAL RESPONSE

Stabilize and Contain the Situation

In the first few minutes of an unplanned hostage situation, the subject's anxiety may overpower rational thought processes. His worst fears are now coming true—he is trapped by the police. He is more likely now to act on impulse or out of desperation. Your first action should be to ensure your own safety by approaching the crisis area cautiously. Then attempt to isolate, contain, evaluate the situation, provide an initial report, and request additional resources.

> ***"A good crisis negotiator is a good listener."***

Your next actions should be aimed at reducing the likelihood of further violence. If you can do so safely, without exposing yourself or others to danger, begin to clear the area of pedestrians. If they can be evacuated along routes out of sight of the subject, attempt to do so nonverbally, with hand signals. If innocents are trapped in locations that require they cross a field of fire, delay this evacuation until additional resources arrive. An alternative, depending on your assessment of the subject, is to tell him clearly what you want to do and get him to agree to allow the civilians to leave. You can justify this procedure to the subject by stressing your interest in avoiding an accident or panic on the part of the civilians. Every effort should be made to evacuate these people to a single area to assist in accounting for all innocents and have them available for witness interviews.

You may now decide to contact the subject and attempt to calm him. Reassure him that things are under control outside and that you don't want anyone, including him, injured.

Avoid Eliciting Demands

The first few statements between the two of you may set the tone for the next few hours. Therefore, the first thing you should do is give your name and state that you are a police officer. For example, "Hello in there. My name is _____, with the _____ Police Department. Everything is under control out here. Is everyone all right in there?" Then, follow with statements such as "No one is going to try to come in. I want to make sure no one gets hurt. Can I count on you to keep things calm in there?"

Seemingly innocent questions may give him the opportunity to make demands on you. For example, a question such as, "What's going on in there?" may result in an answer like, "I have this clerk in here with a gun to her head and I'll shoot her if you're not gone in five minutes." Even asking how you can help may result in a demand from the subject.

Special Agent Dolan

Special Agent Fuselier

By listening carefully to the subject's responses, you may be able to determine the sex, race, ethnic group, and even an age range of the subject. Although it may be unavoidable (or even desirable, in some circumstances) to become engaged in an ongoing conversation, you should make every effort to avoid bargaining with the subject or making concessions. If he brings up demands, you should attempt to get him to accept that you can't make those decisions, all you can do is keep the situation outside under control. If the two of you do establish some sort of rapport, the negotiation team may have you remain as the primary negotiator, with their support and guidance.

AFTER CONTAINMENT

Guidelines

The following points are offered as guidelines for use after the situation has been contained.

Keep a log—Even if you have little or no contact with the hostage taker, the tactical and negotiation teams will be looking to you for any information to aid in developing an overall strategy. Thus, early impressions, no matter how vague, are critical.

Record *all* communication with the subject, as well as your initial observations and impressions. Note his exact words, if possible, and your response to him. Make sure that the negotiation team receives this information when it arrives.

Allow the subject to speak—Your anxiety may drive you to want to "talk the subject out," and your tendency may be to talk too much, too early in the incident. A good crisis negotiator is a good listener. It is much more important to let him talk, which may help to reduce his own anxiety. Everything he says is valuable, because it tells you something about him. Further, if he is talking, you are gaining time, and he is not doing other things you may not want him to do. In short, don't try to "push the deal" too early. Finally, if you listen to him, he may provide some hint or indication of his willingness to surrender, to which you can respond.

Avoid giving orders that may escalate the confrontation—At the beginning of a hostage crisis, your efforts should be directed toward decreasing anxiety and tension. We are not suggesting that you allow him to dominate the situation, but you should be ready to adopt a reflective or conciliatory posture.

Play down past events—It is best to minimize the seriousness of the attempted crime. If the subject asks about the condition of others, do not acknowledge any deaths. You can handle this question in a number of ways. You might simply say, "They are all O.K." If you think the subject may have access to a radio, etc., you could respond, "I don't know, but they looked O.K. when I last saw them." In one instance, the officer just told the truth, saying, "I don't know his condition because I've been here talking with you." You could even try to develop his question into an agreement, "I'll get someone to check on his condition if you will assure me of the safety of everyone inside."

Don't offer the subject anything—In these early moments, the subject of an unplanned hostage crisis is primarily interested in his own safety and escape. Offering him something unsolicited, such as food, will be of little use and may cause difficulty for the negotiation team later. Remember, if you listen to the subject, he will tell what is important to him.

Avoid directing frequent attention to the victims—Directing frequent attention to the victims may lead the subject to believe he has more power than he really does. Attempt to get him involved

with you, rather than increasing his involvement with them. However, it may be appropriate in the early stages to ask for the names and condition of all inside (for notification of family, etc.). In doing this, avoid using the word "hostage" and try to humanize the victims by using their names, if you know them, or by referring to them as "the people with you," or as "the woman and the man," for example.

Be as honest as possible—The vast majority of hostage situations are resolved through straightforward, honest dialog between the subject and negotiator. One of the first tasks for you and the negotiation team is to establish rapport with, and the trust of, the subject. If he perceives the authorities as trying to trick him or lie to him, this could, at the very least, lengthen negotiation, and at worst, might result in injury to a hostage. The subject will generally accept the fact that you can't allow him to go and that you can't make decisions about possible deals.

> **"... avoid taking the weapon directly from the subject as part of the surrender."**

If you are not sure what he means by some statement or demand, ask him!—Don't try to interpret an unclear statement. Simply ask the subject what he meant. For example, a depressed subject may say, "Soon everything will be O.K." Or, a seriously mentally disturbed subject may create his own words (called neologisms) or use common words in a very unusual way. If you are not sure what he means, ask!

However, good judgment should prevail here. For example, if he says that unless he gets a car in 10 minutes, "Something bad is going to happen to the hostage," it would not be prudent to ask for clarification, because this may give him the chance (or make him feel obligated) to make specific threats toward the hostage.

Never dismiss any request as trivial—Remember, it is more important to be a good listener than a good talker. If the subject brings it up, it is significant to him. Discussing a seemingly trivial demand for cigarettes or an irrelevant topic will help keep things calm, set up a precedent for "working together," and allow time to pass.

Never say no—No matter how unreasonable, exorbitant, or weird a demand, never tell the subject "no." However, this does not mean saying yes. Usually, in the early stages of a hostage situation, simply indicate that you understand his demand and will pass it on to the other officers or the negotiation team when they arrive. Avoid using terms such as "the chief" or "the boss."

Soften the demands—If you must respond to a specific demand (e.g., one accompanied by a specific threat), it is better to soften the demand. For example, in response to a demand for a car and $100,000 in 30 minutes, you could respond, "O.K., I understand you would like some money and transportation, and I'll make sure someone starts working on it as soon as they get here."

Never set a deadline on yourself and try not to accept a deadline—Never tell the subject that anything will be done within a specific time (e.g., "I'll have the coffee for you in 10 minutes"). First, almost invariably the coffee will not be available in 10 minutes, and you will have to answer for it. Second, once the coffee is available and ready to go, you should wait until he brings it up again (stalling for time), or wait until you can use the delivery of the coffee to your advantage (e.g., to get by a more critical deadline).

Don't make alternate suggestions—If a response to a request is unavailable or unattainable (remember, never say no), don't suggest an alternative, unless it would be to your advantage and it has been discussed with and agreed to by the on-scene commander.

Don't introduce outsiders—Resolution of a hostage crisis is a law enforcement responsibility. Allowing a nonlaw enforcement person to enter into an ongoing hostage situation is a decision that should be made (by the on-scene commander) only after careful consideration of all possible outcomes. You should advise the negotiation team of anyone at the scene who approached you or who may have information about the incident (e.g., wife, minister, lawyer, friends, etc.) but you should not let anyone else talk to the subject.

Do not allow any exchange of hostages, and especially do not exchange yourself for a hostage—Just as friends, family, etc., who may be on the scene should not be permitted to talk with the subject, neither should an exchange (one person for another) be permitted under any circumstances. Most important, do not offer to exchange yourself for the release of hostages.

If you sense the possibility, ask about suicide—If through conversations with the subject you sense that he may be considering suicide, ask him directly, "Are you going to commit suicide?" or "Are you going to kill yourself?" Every major suicide or crisis hotline in the United States considers this type of response *essential* in suicide prevention. If he was not going to kill himself, you will not push him over the edge or put the idea in his head. If he is seriously considering suicide, he may realize that you can understand how he feels. This may be the first step toward establishing rapport and a dialog that would encourage him to abandon his weapon and walk out.

Never expose yourself in order to negotiate face to face—We have no data that indicate you get better results negotiating face to face, and by doing so, you are unnecessarily risking your life. Further, if the subject threatens your life, other officers may have to expose themselves in order to assist you. Finally, if the subject is considering suicide, he may use an assault on you to set up a "suicide by cop,"[3] deliberately provoking officers into taking his life.

Carefully plan the surrender—The subject may decide to surrender before a perimeter has been set up and a definite surrender plan devised. The surrender process is critical, since you have an armed subject preparing to move from a barricade position to your control. Therefore, you should give careful consideration to exactly what instructions you will give him.

> **"What you do in the first 15 to 45 minutes of a hostage incident can have a significant effect on the eventual outcome...."**

Each of the primary methods of exit from the crisis site (i.e., hostages first or subject first) has advantages and disadvantages. Although we can't tell you which plan would be best for your situation, here are some things you should consider.

We suggest that you avoid taking the weapon directly from the subject as part of the surrender. Instead, arrange for him to leave it in a safe place, preferably where you can see it. In this case, having the subject exit first may remove the immediate threat to the hostages but would not allow you to instruct the subject to leave the weapon inside the crisis site since it would be accessible to the hostages. Further, if the subject panics and changes his mind, the hostages inside the stronghold are still at risk. On the other hand, having hostages exit first removes them from harm's way immediately but allows the hostage incident to evolve into a barricade if the subject changes his mind.

It is tempting to recommend a particular method, but the above examples illustrate that a slight change in circumstances may make a previously risk effective plan unacceptable. Perhaps the best statement we can make is to quote Lt. Robert Louden (Ret.) of the New York Police Department, "Safety and control must always be the prime considerations in the decisionmaking process."[4]

CONCLUSION

What you do in the first 15 to 45 minutes of a hostage incident can have a significant effect on the eventual outcome of that incident. The guidelines presented in this article have been used effectively by local, State, and Federal law enforcement agencies in hostage and barricade incidents throughout the United States. If you, as the first responding officer to such an incident, keep them in mind, you will have done your part in increasing the likelihood of a successful resolution to the incident.

FBI

Footnotes

[1] W.G. Spaulding, "The Longest Hour: The First Response to Terrorist Incidents," *Law Enforcement Technology*, July/August 1987, p. 26.

[2] Ninety-six percent of 404 known domestic hijackers are male, personal interview with Frederick L. Lanceley, FBI Academy, Quantico, VA, 1988.

[3] David S. Soskis and Clinton R. Van Zandt, "Hostage Negotiation: Law Enforcement's Most Effective Nonlethal Weapon," *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, vol. 4, No. 4, 1986, pp. 423-435.

[4] Personal interview with Robert Louden during FBI Hostage Negotiation Course, FBI Academy, Quantico, VA, 1984.