SWAT Mission to Protect, Serve

by K_Guice

They sweep on the scene in heavily armored vehicles; an unassailable swarm of officers emerge clad in camouflage, helmets, facemasks, armor shields and weapons. They all move as one with stealth precision. What sounds like a scene straight from a primetime police drama is reality and happening right here on the streets of Bend. Everyday police officers, fire emergency medical service personnel and an emergency room physician, all specially trained, are on standby and ready to go into action when duty calls. They are the individuals that make up the SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) team. â€œInitially formed in 1981, it was called the Bend Emergency Response Team,â€• says Lt. Jim Porter, a member of the team. At the time it was solely operated by the Bend Police Department. In 1999, it became a multi-jurisdictional SWAT team with officers from the Bend Police Department, Redmond Police Department, Deschutes County Sheriffâ€™s Office, Madras Police Department, Jefferson County Sheriffâ€™s Office, Prineville Police Department and Crook county Sheriffâ€™s Office. SWAT is a specialized unit of law enforcement trained to perform dangerous operations. That can include serving high-risk arrest warrants, perform hostage rescues, preventing terrorist attacks and engaging heavily armed criminals. According to Lt. Porter it is a dangerous job, but their team is highly trained and prepared for any situation. SWAT personnel must be fully accredited law enforcement officers. Most have over five years of experience. â€œWe train twice a month, eight hour days. Three times a year we take a full week and train with the Oregon State police swat team,â€• he said. Two of the three weeks the team spends at Camp Rilea near Astoria in various conditions training on military equipment. â€œWe put in 300 hours per year,â€• he added. â€œThese highly and specially trained personnel spend hours upon hours practicing for every conceivable situation where standard law enforcement tactics and equipment will not work,â€• said Steve Esselstyn, Community Liaison for the Bend Police Department.

The SWAT team is trained using specialized firearms and equipment to ensure they get the job done as safely and effectively as possible. The teams are outfitted with submachine guns, tear gas, grenades, and high-powered rifles for marksmen (snipers). They often have specialized equipment including heavy body armor, entry tools, steel reinforced boots and night vision optics. Esselstyn added, â€œThe Oregon National Guard works closely with the SWAT team and can provide helicopters with Infra Red Radar and other surveillance equipment.â€• Only a few of Central Oregonâ€™s finest are called upon to join the SWAT team. â€œItâ€™s an election process and we typically have eight applicants for each position,â€• Lt. Porter said. Candidates have to pass a physical fitness agility test and successfully complete a qualification course on the gun range that is much more difficult than the typical test. In addition, they have to take an oral-board exam and psychological test. Above and beyond that, those selected for this elite team are required to be on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. â€œThe call outs can last 24 to 48 hours,â€• said Lt. Porter. â€œI remember two specifically and I got sick immediately after it. They take a lot out of you,â€• he added. â€œThe thing that impresses me is here are these individuals that go about their daily duties and then they get the call and they become business and nothing but business. When they have to put on the uniform there is no second guessing,â€• Esselstyn said. Lt. Porter agrees, â€œThis is a highly dedicated group of individuals.â€• Anytime day or night, Lt. Porter says SWAT will be there. From drug bust to protecting public figures, they could be anywhere. â€œWhen the President came to Bend four years ago, we provided protection,â€• Lt. Porter said. However, while they are trained and are called upon to protect dignitaries, about 80 percent of their call outs are to serve high-risk warrants. Some of the biggest dangers the team faces is serving drug warrants. There is a higher level of unpredictability when you are serving someone who is potentially on drugs, said Lt. Porter. Some users, like meth abusers, have been up for days with no sleep and they become paranoid and delusional. Factor in the fact that Americans have easy access to firearms and that adds up to a potentially bad situation. Lt. Porter said, â€œYou put a gun in the hand of paranoid delusional and I donâ€™t care how big of a sign you put on your chest, theyâ€™re not going to see that, they see someone coming to take their drugs away.â€• While it is dangerous, he adds, â€œItâ€™s just part of the job.â€• The effects of a job well done are being seen in various areas, such as the war on drugs. Methamphetamines have been a major concern in Oregon, but Lt. Porter says they are making progress and it can be seen in subtle ways. He says just 18 months ago it was easy to go in and make a large-scale transition and walk out with a

multi-pound deal. However, after so many busts, Lt. Porter says itâ€™s hard to buy more than a quarter of a pound. â€œWeâ€™re forcing them to carry less,â€• he said. The impact can also be seen on the street. â€œMeth costs have gone up 30 percent. That is a clear indication that there is less available based on the price,â€• Lt. Porter said. At the end of the day, even a 48-hour day, Lt. Porter says it is very rewarding. â€œWhen you get done with a mission you can turn around, look and say, â€œwowâ€• I made a difference. I saved someoneâ€™s life and we are all going home safe.â€• Esselstyn says itâ€™s that devotion and passion for the community that is so outstanding. â€œThese are a dedicated core of individuals willing to sacrifice to make sure the city of Bend is safe no matter what.â€• Bend Oregon Central Oregon Bend Weekly

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