

department | **TACTICAL CONCEPTS**

Swarming

By Sid Heal



tactics

“
Simply put, a swarming tactic is one in which the scheme of maneuver involves multiple semi-autonomous units that converge on a single target from many directions. The name, as well as many of the concepts, is taken from the tactics of insects like ants, bees and hornets and of animals that hunt in packs like wolves and sharks.

”

Of all the situations that require an intervention by law enforcement, conflicts are by far the most dangerous and complex. This is because conflicts involve one or more adversaries who are in active opposition of the efforts to restrain them.¹

Some types of conflicts are exceptionally difficult and dangerous, none more so than an active shooter situation. History has shown that the vast majority of casualties resulting from these types of incidents occur within the first few minutes of the incident. Moreover, most of these shooters have no intention of surviving the confrontation, either by committing suicide or being killed by police. The suddenness and extreme violence of such attacks coupled the pernicious nature of the suspect(s) requires a response tightly focused on quickly preventing further injuries to potential victims.

Because urgency is the critical factor in these situations, conventional tactics that involve containments, negotiations and massed assaults are far too sluggish to prevent further casualties. One tactic that provides such a rapid response is called “swarming.”

Simply put, a *swarming tactic* is one in which the scheme of maneuver involves multiple semi-autonomous units that converge on a single target from many directions. The name, as well as many of the concepts, is taken from the tactics of insects like ants, bees and hornets and of animals that hunt in packs like wolves and sharks. An adversary confronted by a swarming tactic is put in a quandary in that a defense against one attack creates a vulnerability from another and is further frustrated as more maneuver elements² create multiple threats. Ignoring any threat creates opportunities for exploitation.

In prolonged engagements, attacks at different times and places from different maneuver elements and often in different manners create a “pulsing” effect that continues the deterioration. Effective countermeasures are exceedingly difficult in that it is nearly impossible to determine from where, how and when the next attack will come.

Critical to the success of any law enforcement swarming operation is the ability to quickly respond and engage an adversary with little or no input from higher authority.

Generally, swarming tactics take one of two forms. The first is called a “massed swarm.”³ This type of attack occurs after the maneuver elements have massed at a staging area or from another formation and then disperse to simultaneously attack from multiple directions. The second is a “dispersed

swarm”⁴ which involves maneuver elements which are already dispersed and converge on a target from many directions. Of the two, the second is most appealing for law enforcement applications since patrol units are typically already dispersed throughout an area and collecting them into a staging area before dispersing them is almost always counterproductive.

Because of the difficulties in controlling the larger number of maneuver elements involved in swarming operations coupled with the rapidity of their movement and necessity for immediate action, collaboration is more critical than command and control. Thus, each of the maneuver elements must be vested with decision-making authority traditionally reserved for a higher headquarters. This renders them semi-autonomous and enables them to seek, create and exploit opportunities based upon their individual situational awareness. Understandably, the objective must be

Tactic	Major Advantages	Major Disadvantages	Primary Factor	Commonly Used for:
Hammer & Anvil	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple to employ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abundance of personnel and equipment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overwhelming force 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barricaded suspects
Envelopment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economy of force 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High degree of planning and coordination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploits a weakness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warrant services
Pincer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quick response 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordination difficulties • Difficult containments • Potential friendly fire 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploits a weakness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foot pursuits
Swarm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speed of execution • Does not rely on containment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • C² challenges • Requires highly robust communications • Potential friendly fire 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contemporaneous collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Officer needs help • Active shooters

There is no “size small, fits all” tactic suitable for every encounter. This matrix compares the four most common tactics used in law enforcement operations. An understanding of what works and why provides insight into both the selection and adaptation of tactics to specific situations. (For a more detailed discussion of the hammer & anvil, envelopment and pincer tactics, see “The Tactical Trio,” *The Tactical Edge*, Summer 2010, pp. 40-41)

clearly understood lest divergent perspectives create confusion. The necessity for high levels of training, discipline, maturity, communication and coordination should be self-evident.

Critical to the success of any law enforcement swarming operation is the ability to quickly respond and engage an adversary with little or no input from higher authority. Initial reports are always somewhat sketchy and confusing. Even good information grows stale very quickly and so the situational awareness necessary to make effective tactical decisions is largely gained at the crime scene. In order to create cohesion and facilitate collaboration amongst the maneuver elements it is vital that the situational awareness is shared in order to create a common operational picture.⁵ Accordingly, reliable and efficient communications are a critical requirement⁶ for any successful swarming operation.

Like any other tactic, swarming is not without its drawbacks, not the least of which are the formidable challenges to conventional — even cherished — methods for command and control. The absolute necessity to relinquish control normally reserved for higher headquarters to the maneuver units is nearly incomprehensible to some of the more staid. Nevertheless, without the authority to make decisions based upon the local conditions and unfolding situation, the entire effort becomes mired in antiquated protocols and loses

...the strength of the pack is the wolf and the strength of the wolf is the pack.

Rudyard Kipling

While swarming tactics represent a significant departure from conventional tactics for military operations, they are simply an extension of “business as usual” for the law enforcement community. In fact, swarming tactics have been the preferred method when responding to “officer needs help” calls long before they were considered for active shooter situations.

momentum. Nearly as daunting is the need for close coordination among the maneuver elements to maximize the swarming effects without friendly casualties. This requires constant communication, usually by radio, which in turn requires strict radio discipline to avoid squelching other communicators.

While swarming tactics represent a significant departure from conventional tactics for military operations, they are simply an extension of “business as usual” for the law enforcement community. In fact, swarming tactics have been the preferred method when responding to “officer needs help” calls long before they were considered for active shooter situations.

Regardless of the specific circumstances for which a swarming tactic is used as a remedy, the primary objectives are to find, fix and defeat the adversary. Because of the relatively large number of maneuver elements that comprise a swarming tactic, finding an adversary is greatly facilitated when compared with more conventional

approaches, since a larger number of maneuver elements has the advantage of covering a greater area in a shorter amount of time. This nearly always occurs in at least two phases. The first is “movement to objective” in which the notification serves as an execute order⁷ and the command and control remains unchanged. The second is the “actions on the objective” in which case the maneuver elements are authorized more control as they move with relative autonomy and coordinate with each other to locate and fix the suspect(s) before attempts are made to “defeat in place.”⁸ Once a suspect is located and fixed, more conventional methods can be employed.

In spite of the difficulties in employing such complex tactics, swarming provides advantages that cannot be achieved by other means, especially speed of execution. Since the immediate objective in responding to an active shooter is to prevent further casualties, any interference or disruption of the suspect’s plans works in the favor of innocent victims and the authorities alike. Notwithstanding, the value of preparation and training cannot be overestimated. ◀

Endnotes

1. For more information on the nature of conflicts, see “Characteristics of Crises and Conflicts,” *The Tactical Edge*, Fall 2002, pp. 57-58.
2. A maneuver element is simply a component of a tactical formation capable of changing position in order to gain a position of advantage. For simplicity and clarity, the term is used throughout this discussion as a generic substitute for typical law enforcement maneuver elements, such as radio cars, patrol cars, squads, platoons or mobile field forces.
3. Also called a “cloud swarm” in that even though the “swarm” is loosely collected it arrives and remains comparatively together.
4. Also called a “vapor swarm” in that the formation never coalesces into a definable group.
5. For more information on this subject see, “Situational Awareness and a Common Operational Picture,” *The Tactical Edge*, Spring 2002, pp. 55-56.
6. For more information on critical capabilities see “Determining Centers of Gravity and Critical Vulnerabilities,” *The Tactical Edge*, Winter 2009, pp. 54-56.
7. For more information on orders, see “Four Types of Orders,” *The Tactical Edge*, Summer 1998, p. 77.
8. While the terms, “movement to objective,” “actions on the objective” and “defeat in place” are sometimes novel to law enforcement officers, they are well-known to the military community and are used here for clarity and accuracy.