

High-Threat Disablement

An Added Dimension to the LASD Bomb Squad

By Mike Digby, LASD Bomb Squad

With the eyes of the world focused on the tragic mass shooting in Aurora Colorado, another potentially deadly event was unfolding in Long Beach California – one event in a steady line of call-outs this past Summer and Fall that would serve to validate our many hours of specialized training and preparation.

On the afternoon of July 20, 2012, twice-convicted bomber and self-proclaimed Armageddonist; Bernard Leon Daniels, was arrested by patrol officers of the Long Beach Police Department (LBPD) for possessing a hoax device. A detective conducted an interview of Daniels and learned that improvised explosive devices and booby-traps were hidden within Daniels' residence. The apartment building and surrounding area was evacuated, a Special Weapons Team established a cordon, and the FBI/Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD) Bomb Squad was summoned.

Daniels was already well known to the FBI/LASD Bomb Squad primarily for two significant events. In 1997, he was convicted and sentenced to prison for modifying his personal vehicle to launch nine command-fired improvised rockets at prostitutes. At the time of his arrest, he was armed with a pistol and wearing body armor.

Then again, in 2008, he was convicted and re-sentenced to prison for manufacturing pipe-bombs and improvised grenades and rigging his hotel room with command-fired and booby-trapped improvised shotguns. That arrest resulted after he caused an accidental explosion in his room.

With Daniels' history for bomb-building well-established, there followed a thirteen hour clearance and disposal operation. Initial entry to the booby-trapped residence was done by two robots. Then, FBI/LASD bomb technicians removed and rendered safe seven live pipe-bombs, several functional booby-traps and barricades, 21 improvised and concealed shotguns rigged as disguised

booby-traps – each positioned in such a way as to target all doorways and windows, and dismantled a heavily barricaded IED workshop with improvised weapons and switches, a cache of improvised explosives and more than fifty pipe-bombs under construction. His vehicle contained an array of improvised command-fired rocket launchers/shotguns and firing system and a pipebomb mounting platform. He pled guilty at arraignment and was sentenced again, to prison.

Thirty days later, another event occurred, one that received significant worldwide attention – a bank manager held hostage during a robbery with a suspected IED strapped to her body. Using rapid threat assessment and skillful





questioning of the hostage, the device was removed from her body within four minutes of Bomb Squad arrival. Moments later, it was determined to be a hoax. The bomb techs on scene commented, “It felt like one of those training scenarios.”

And just a few weeks before Christmas, three local Doomsdayers laid a number of victim-operated boobytrap devices throughout their home, set the house on fire, then committed suicide. Bomb technicians were summoned to the scene to assist arson investigators in identifying and safely dismantling all of the explosive and incendiary hazards. The hazards encountered in this scenario were similar to any number of Category A situations previously practiced in scenario training exercises.

Like any other bomb squad, a delicate balance must be struck between operational responsibilities and training commitments. The calls for service can't be put on hold just because training has been planned. We have found that the most efficient and cost-effective way to train and

prepare, is to conduct disciplined training. Not training that is self-serving and unorganized, but training that challenges the individual, the team, the entire squad and all of our integrated partners.

Several years ago, the FBI/LASD Bomb Squad began a modular approach to conventional IEDD training; focusing first on individual skills – both technical and tactical, before moving on to team drills and full squad exercises. The conventional curriculum included Incident Scene Management, Threat Assessment/Render-Safe Procedures, IED Construction and Design, IED Electronics, Disposal Operations and Improvised Explosives.

Only after the conventional tasks were mastered through repetitive training, did we address the more advanced skill-sets – a capability we define as High Threat Disablement (HTD). These skill-sets enable us to perform in a variety of high-threat environments, employing Special Tools, conducting Hazardous Materials/WMD Operations, Advanced

Diagnostics, Hostage Handling, Precision X-Ray, SWT Support, integrated operations with aviation, SWT, HazMat, transit and canine teams, firefighters, as well as live-fire rehearsals in transit, maritime, confined space and high-rise venues.

Conventional and HTD skills are incorporated into our monthly sustainment training. The key to our training is the realism. No “death house” or “out-of-this-world” scenarios, no “Walter Mitty” devices built by a scientist, but exercises and devices based on real or existing local threats. I am proud to say that this training has proven its worth and works for us.

Mike Digby is a 34-year veteran of the LASD, with fifteen years on the Bomb Squad. Prior to LASD, he served six years in the US Army. He is the LASD Bomb Squad training coordinator and credits both A-T Solutions and EW-Solutions with developing custom-designed and innovative modular training plans that provide a solid instructional framework for LASD bomb technicians.