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ROUGH and READY

2012

SANTA CLARA COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

BEST IN THE

WEST

INVITATIONAL SWAT COMPETITION



FINAL EVENT STANDINGS

TOP TEAM: LAS VEGAS METROPOLITAN PD

JUNGLE TRAIL: ALAMEDA, CA SO

SNIPER COURSE: CONCORD, CA PD

TEAM ASSAULT: LAS VEGAS METRO PD

VEHICLE ASSAULT: SUNNYVALE, CA DPS

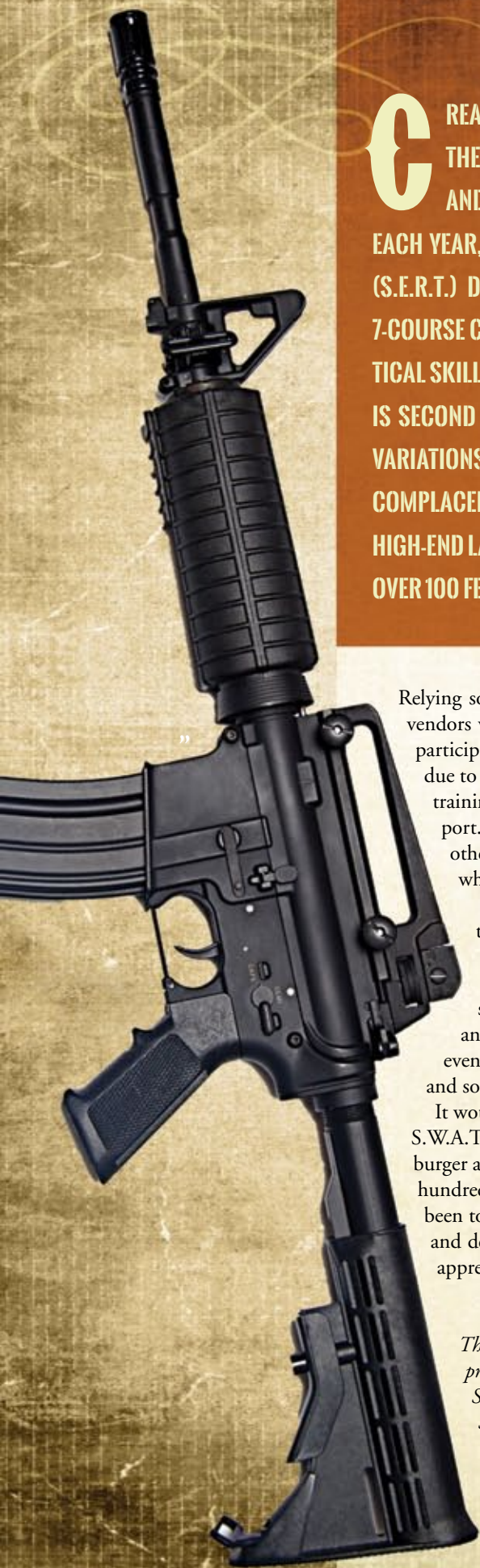
PHYSICAL CHALLENGE: ALAMEDA, CA SO

TWO PERSON ASSAULT: SONOMA, CA SO

TOP GUN: DAN LIVINGSTON, CAMPBELL, CA PD

SOME IDEAS ARE MEANT TO BE SHARED. ADD INGREDIENTS LIKE TEAMWORK AND DETERMINATION AND YOU'VE GOT A WINNING COMBINATION FOR TESTING THE SKILLS OF POLICE S.W.A.T. TEAMS. "BEST IN THE WEST" (BITW), THE LARGEST INVITATIONAL S.W.A.T. COMPETITION IN THE WESTERN U.S., HAD ITS HUMBLE BEGINNING IN THE SUMMER OF 1991. NOW IN ITS 20TH YEAR, THIS TWO-DAY EVENT—HELD IN SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA ON SEPTEMBER 20 AND 21, 2012—HAS WITHSTOOD THE TEST OF TIME AND IS KNOWN IN LAW ENFORCEMENT CIRCLES AS THE ANNUAL CHALLENGE NOT-TO-BE MISSED.





CREATED AND HOSTED BY THE SANTA CLARA COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE (SCCSO), THE EVENT HAD ITS GENESIS WITH FORMER SHERIFF CHARLES GILLINGHAM, AND CONTINUES TODAY UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF SHERIFF LAURIE SMITH. EACH YEAR, MEMBERS OF THE DEPARTMENTS SHERIFF'S EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAM (S.E.R.T.) DESIGN, PHYSICALLY CONSTRUCT, AND OVERSEE AN INTENSIVE TWO-DAY, 7-COURSE COMPETITION, WHERE S.W.A.T. TEAMS OF THE WEST COME TO TEST THEIR TACTICAL SKILLS IN A MULTI-JURISDICTIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCE AND CHALLENGE THAT IS SECOND TO NONE IN THIS PART OF OUR NATION. COMPLETE WITH SEVERAL YEARLY VARIATIONS AND TWISTS DESIGNED TO KEEP ANY RETURNING TEAMS FROM BECOMING COMPLACENT, THE EVENT THIS YEAR HOSTED 29 TEAMS, OVER A DOZEN VENDORS OF HIGH-END LAW ENFORCEMENT (LE) EQUIPMENT, AND HAD AN INVITATIONAL DATABASE OF OVER 100 FEDERAL, STATE, COUNTY, AND MUNICIPAL JURISDICTIONS.

Relying solely on corporate and private donations, as well as the modest fees charged to the vendors who display an array of LE products, BITW has never charged an entry fee for any participating team, something unheard of in these days of restrictive training budgets. This is due to the forward thinking of Sheriff Smith, who believes that any venue that can serve as a training ground, and as a forum for exchange of tactical strategy, deserves her utmost support. The event provides an opportunity for tactical teams to challenge and learn from each other, and it also brings together administrative officers from the participating teams, which have come from as far away as the state of Texas.

Planning and working on the event as early as seven months in advance, members of the S.E.R.T. offer the vast majority of these efforts on their own time, demonstrating a level of dedication and professionalism one might expect from a top ranked department like SCCSO. Sheriff Smith takes great pride in the team, not only for their own standard of excellence during S.W.A.T. operations, but for their level of commitment and competence in managing the BITW competition. Since only two days (the actual event) are considered 'work time,' it's impressive to see how team members pour their heart and soul into coordinating such a highly rated S.W.A.T. challenge, and make it shine.

It would have been difficult to imagine, back in 1991, when the team leaders of three local S.W.A.T. teams got together to conduct a joint firearms training class, that a mid-day hamburger and hotdog barbecue would someday grow to a nationally-recognized event, involving hundreds of officers and some 1,400 catered meals. As years passed, S.W.A.T. teams who had been to BITW fought for space to come back again. All commented on how well organized and demanding the events were, that they had learned new skills, enjoyed themselves, and appreciated the level of camaraderie and high spirits among other extreme athletes.

The following seven courses are timed events, and tests competitors for physical conditioning, proficiency with weapons, a demonstration of tactics and decision-making, and marksmanship. Shooters are penalized for poor shot placement, with points deducted from the final score. As SCCSO is the host department, their team members are not allowed to participate in any tactical maneuvers. For safety and liability reasons, BITW is closed to the public. Accredited members of the press and acknowledged tactical publication authors are welcome.

PHYSICAL CHALLENGE COURSE

A 6-man team must negotiate a demanding obstacle course, while performing such collateral tasks as carrying a 165-pound dummy to safety, or flipping a 500 pound tractor tire over a distance of 50 yards. The variety of physical obstacles requires an organized team effort and pure endurance in order to successfully overcome each challenge. This event was initially designed as a grueling Hill Run, but the dynamics have evolved into a "real life" scenario that is one of the most demanding anywhere.



SNIPER COURSE

While the other five team members address a series of closer balloon targets, the team sniper is required to take a number of precision shots at these distances: 100 yards in the prone position at a moving target, 160 yards from a prone position, 225 yards from the gun turret of an armored tactical vehicle and 300 yards from the standing, kneeling, and sitting positions on targets varying in size and nature from hanging bowling pins to playing cards, and from locations such as building rooftops and 'tunnels' constructed to limit their physical movement and field of vision. It should be noted that while the efforts of the remainder of the team count toward overall team standings, their performance does not affect the sniper's individual score for this event. The course emphasizes the difficulty of the extensive movements a sniper must undertake in order to get into position, and apply pinpoint accuracy with each shot. A more realistic challenge than courses which simply place the shooter at a starting point.



VEHICLE ASSAULT COURSE

A full-team event and relatively short exercise, averaging under one minute in duration, which tests member's skills in rapid target identification. As part of a dignitary protection detail, the team is the "chase" car and observes the lead cars of the motorcade fall victim to an armed ambush. After "stacking" on the running boards of an armored SUV, the team drives forward, stopping at a pre-designated mark, and approaches the hot zone on foot. They encounter four stationary vehicles (one engulfed in flames), which contain both "good guy" and "tango" (hostile) pop-up targets. As targets appear, team members must quickly analyze the threat and neutralize all hostiles, without engaging any good guys. This event replaces the long-standing shotgun challenge, which tested individual marksmanship skills but was lacking in measuring team cohesiveness.



THE JUNGLE TRAIL

Designed to simulate a search for fugitives, this one-mile trek through thick brush, heavily populated with both “tango” (hostile) and hostage targets, contains numerous booby traps scattered throughout the course. This event tests how teams react to threats they encounter, as they remain alert during their search operation.



COMBINED WEAPONS COURSE

This event tests proficiency in the operation of the three basic weapons used by S.W.A.T. teams. The course incorporates running and shooting in a timed setting. The service handgun, submachine gun, and shotgun are fired at multiple targets from a variety of positions, and at challenging and difficult angles. While formerly an “individual event,” this particular course is now factored into the scores for overall “Top Gun” and does not receive an individual award.



TWO PERSON ASSAULT COURSE

The skills of a “two-person” team, the smallest and most basic component of all S.W.A.T. units, are tested during this combination of speed, endurance, and marksmanship. One officer is equipped with a submachine gun; the other is armed with only his service handgun. The event begins with a series of physical challenges, including a 6-foot wall traversal, monkey bars and a balance beam walk. Once those challenges are met, the two competitors must engage a series of targets in awkward and confining positions, such as shooting UNDER a wall (necessitating a ‘roll-over prone’ position), or through narrow ‘gun ports’ in barricades. To test reaction times and target-identification abilities under stress, a rack of steel plates must be accurately hit, before another sprint to the finish line.



TEAMS ASSAULT COURSE

This live-fire house scenario is the “ne plus ultra” of all S.W.A.T. challenges, and requires fluid team-based execution and a total team effort to properly demonstrate forced entry into a fortified stronghold, identify and neutralize numerous threats (often involving dynamic moving targets), and rescue a real-weight “hostage” dummy.

COMPETITOR COMMENT

GILROY/MORGAN HILL REGIONAL SWAT TEAM

14 YEARS WITH GILROY PD

6 YEARS ON SWAT

4TH TIME COMPETING AT BEST IN THE WEST

The competition is well put together by the Santa Clara County Sheriffs Office and is always an enjoyable event. It’s a great opportunity to really test our skills as a team. I view the competition as valuable training time for the team. Most of us are pretty competitive so this event raises the adrenaline and tests our ability to manage that stress. Short of an actual high stress situation, the competition allows teams to test their marksmanship and decision making skills under stress. It doesn’t matter how well you shoot at the range with no threats against you if you can’t hit your target under stress when it really matters.

The event is also a great way to meet operators from other teams, build networks and get new ideas. I think we have a friendly rivalry with some other agencies from the area which gives us a little extra motivation to train a little harder.

— Geoff Guerin, Police Corporal

GLOSSARY

DPS:
(from team standings) Department of Public Safety

NE PLUS ULTRA:
a Latin phrase meaning ‘the ultimate’

TANGO:
Synonymous with ‘target’



THE AUTHOR AND THE AMERICAN BOARD FOR CERTIFICATION IN HOMELAND SECURITY (ABCHS) PROGRAM WISH TO EXPRESS THEIR THANKS TO SANTA CLARA COUNTY SHERIFF LAURIE SMITH; RETIRED SCCSO SERGEANT MARK LEONARDINI, A FORMER SERT TEAM LEADER WHO, FOR A DOZEN YEARS, WAS THE BITW EVENT COORDINATOR; SERGEANT JOSE CARDOZA, PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER (PIO) FOR SCCSO; KEN DIN, CIVILIAN EMPLOYEE OF THE SCCSO PERSONNEL AND TRAINING UNIT, WHO DOUBLES AS THE DEPARTMENT’S OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPHER, AND DEPUTY JANEL KARRLE, WHO PROVIDED ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE EVENT.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARK WITHROW, CHS-V, FABCHS, DABCIP began his law enforcement career in 1981 with the U.S. Department of Justice, and has served on tactical response and special enforcement teams. He is the founder and director of California Self-Defense Consultants and conducts seminars on weaponless defense tactics to law enforcement and security personnel throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. Withrow, an NRA certified instructor and Certified Training Officer (CTO) for the State of California, is P.O.S.T. certified in Search and Rescue (SAR) and is a qualified observer for BITW and the Urban Shield full-scale exercise. He can be reached at strikeforce574@aol.com.

