

WHAT'S THE RIGHT GEAR FOR TODAY'S TACTICAL OPERATIONS?

Plate Carriers vs. Full Entry Gear

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January 14, 2022

One of the unique aspects of working for a sheriff's department is the continual interaction with other agencies through academies, in-service training and mutual aid requests. At the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Special Enforcement Bureau, we host SWAT schools, explosive breaching courses, long rifle programs, K9-SWAT integration, carbine class, TacMed, public safety diver and numerous agency-requested training days. As a result, we have the opportunity to observe how teams are structured, what gear is utilized and what tactics are implemented by teams of varying size and experience.

Over the last several years, we have witnessed a trend away from entry-level armor and toward a smaller plate carrier footprint with, in some cases, a minimal amount of coverage. Two factors are driving this migration to plate carriers over traditional entry vests. First, tactical teams tend to mimic what Tier 1 level military units are utilizing whether it is uniforms, boots or gear. Second, tactical team members want to be comfortable for operations that can last several hours in all weather conditions.

We have all heard the axioms "Mission drives the gear" and "Mobility is life," but are the missions of domestic law enforcement the same as military operations that drive their gear selection? We ask this question because some of the trade off in the reduction of armor coverage that makes perfect sense in combat simply does not in most law

enforcement tactical operations.

Unlike military operations, the vast majority of SWAT call-outs do not include:

- Insertions that require foot movement to the target measured in clicks or miles
- Sustained operations lasting days or weeks without relief
- Opposition predominately armed with rifles thereby negating the protection of soft armor
- Carrying heavy weapons systems
- Carrying an ammunition load-out to support prolonged engagements

Most tactical team missions revolve around the main three missions: high-risk warrant service, barricaded suspect operations and hostage rescue. The bread-and-butter task of nearly all tactical teams is high-risk warrant service where we measure distance, covered from our armored rescue vehicles to the entry point, in feet not miles or kilometers. Does the addition of soft armor that covers additional chest, shoulders, arms and plate gaps really hamper movement over that distance? Additionally, we as a unit are finding more houses with surveillance cameras, which are inexpensive these days and capture our movements and positions, thereby providing suspects knowledge of where to engage. Is the tradeoff of comfort or obstacle course speed worth increased exposure and chance of injury on a high-risk warrant mission that does not necessitate the saving of soft

armor weight? I know you want to be light and fast, but does that reduced footprint plate carrier make you faster than 950 fps as you breach a door with an unknown on the other side? A .25 caliber bullet that strikes an unprotected clavicle and travels into the body can do immense damage.

Do barricaded suspect or hostage rescue missions require a smaller armor footprint to achieve success? In a barricaded suspect operation, time is on our side and there are plenty of options prior to ever entering the structure to take the suspect into custody. This operation can last several hours to a full day so fatigue can be an issue. I personally participated in numerous operations that lasted well over 20+ hours both as handling team and containment personnel. They were equally fatiguing but that does not mean I want to reduce my armor protection. In all those cases, chemical agents were ineffective against the suspects and after eliminating all other available options, the team had to enter and take the person into custody. Is that a scenario where you want minimal coverage when entering the structure or would you prefer more coverage?

Hostage rescue operations are more complicated in that we put ourselves at higher risk to save lives of innocents. Short of a hostage rescue on an aircraft or maritime platform or some confined space, why would we want a reduced armor footprint? There is an increased risk of shots fired at us upon a called crisis/emergency entry when we have armed suspects holding hostages. Is that a time for less armor protection? When I was new to the team, my former scout and teammate explained it to me this way: "If you knew 100% that you were going to get shot at as soon as you entered that door, how much armor would you want? How do you know the next door you enter isn't that one?"

Now are there missions where reduced weight, better mobility and agility outweigh up-armored coverage? Absolutely! Our tactical K9 unit averages 300 to 400 searches a year for high-risk suspects and they could not sustain long area searches repeatedly each night in full entry gear. Rural operations and maritime operations are another mission set that plate carrier level coverage is preferable to entry gear. The county

of Los Angeles is over 4,700 square miles with mountains, deserts, oceans and islands. Climbing a caving ladder up the side of a ship in an entry vest is a recipe for disaster. Someone falling off in those conditions will soon become friends with Davy Jones.

Several years ago, we assisted Kern County Sheriff's with a murder suspect search in Jawbone Canyon. At the time, only a few teammates had plate carriers and those that did not suffered during the prolonged area search in entry vests. The Kern County Sheriff Deputies, however, were wearing plate carriers and climbed like billy goats. If you have rural areas or maritime obligations, then plate carriers are an essential piece of kit in addition to, but not a replacement for, entry-level armor that should be used during primary operations.

My goal is not to recommend a particular vest or configuration because I have not found a perfect option. There are always trade-offs on coverage, weight, mobility and price. What I hope to accomplish is for you to ask if you are equipping yourself with the correct gear for your mission or if you are settling for what special operations are wearing without understanding the why behind it? I don't want to see tactical team members operationally injured from choosing comfort over mission realities. New scalable armor platforms are emerging that are hybrids between traditional entry vests and smaller profile plate carriers that are potential game changers. What that acceptable balance is will depend on your team's philosophy, but I hope you ponder these questions and don't solely choose comfort.

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