

Using tactical tracking teams as a force multiplier

By Kevin Reeve



Tactical tracking teams are a force multiplier for tactical response teams, providing capabilities and assets that give teams a significant advantage over the criminals in their jurisdiction. The following two stories show first what typically happens without a tracking team in place and then how a tactical team responds to a very similar situation with a much different outcome. Both are actual incidents.

Situation one: To be avoided

It starts as a routine traffic stop. But the driver of the vehicle shows an outstanding warrant. Before he can be cuffed, he jumps in his car and drives away. Now it is a high-speed pursuit. After several miles of driving at 90-plus mph, the escaping driver slows along the side of the parkway, pulls over on the shoulder, stops the car abruptly and jumps out. In a flash, he has darted into the 6-foot high marsh grass and disappeared. The pursuing officers call it in. Before long, the helicopter is in the air. K-9 teams are en route. The pursuing officers follow the trail of the broken grass into a marsh. They lose the trail and thrash around in the swamp looking for some clue of where the driver may have gone, but they cannot follow the trail. The helicopter is of little assistance. The outside temperature is 90 degrees, so the Forward

Looking Infrared (FLIR) is of no value. The humidity is about 90 percent, making the situation for searchers rough. An incident command is soon established.

Dog teams and officers are brought in to search. By dawn, several dozen officers are searching the swamp and grass fields for the missing felon. No sign of the runner is found. But the dogs and officers continue their search. As the search continues, some things are becoming clear. The officers do not have sufficient time in the woods to be able to keep track of where they are and where they have searched. Two teams cannot report where they are. They do not want to admit they are lost, but that is a safe conclusion. Another search team reports that one member is suffering from heat exhaustion. The helicopter is called in to evacuate this officer. Finally, after 20 frustrating hours of searching, the incident commander calls it quits. If the bad guy is in these woods, he will stay.

Fortunately, the subject is picked up going into his girlfriend's house the next day. He had gone through the swamp, came out the other side and cut back into town.

Unfortunately, this is a great example of what should not happen, but it is a common reality. But it does not have to be. Consider a similar second situation.

Situation two: How it's supposed to be done

A high-speed chase on the freeway began with a routine traffic stop. The driver, however, was wanted on three warrants, and when the officer tried to make the arrest, the driver and his accomplice drove away at high speed. A chase ensued. Several miles down the road, the criminal's car swerves out of control and careens down the embankment. The two men jump out of the car and run into the woods as the pursuing officer arrives on the scene. He sees a pistol in the hands of one of the men. He radios for assistance.

The commander calls for the tactical response team to be activated. He also activates the tactical tracking team. A mobile command post is set up at the scene. Looking at the maps, the commander puts additional assets on the roads surrounding the tract. Unfortunately, it is a large tract of forested land, and while he can set up patrols, he cannot possibly cover all the roads that ring this tract. He sets roadblocks out at the key intersections and waits for the tactical teams to arrive. The trackers arrive first and one of the trackers using the computer in the back of his vehicle generates detailed topographical maps. Another tracker interviews the pursuing officer, while the remaining

team members begin to search for the runners' trail.

The tactical response team arrives and prepares to deploy. They will follow behind the trackers and take over the capture when the time comes. The trackers prepare to begin the chase. Armed, armored and ready to roll, they begin tracking the fugitives into the woods. The team's first priority is security, and as they move into the woods, they are providing cover for one another and remain alert for ambushes. Using their tried and true movement techniques makes them very difficult to surprise.

More importantly, the tracking team now has a vector, a direction of travel taken by the subjects. They radio into the incident command once the general direction of travel is established, allowing the IC to focus blocking resources in a more concentrated area.

The first hundred yards was a panicked run by the bad boys. They sprinted until they could run no more, then stopped and caught their breath. The trackers have reached this point, and they know that from here the trail gets dicey. The fugitives know they will be pursued, so they are beginning to be a bit more cautious. The trackers are moving slowly and cautiously. They call on four members of the tactical response team who are also trained as trackers to cut for sign. They send this second team on a large circling action in an attempt to either pick up the trail far ahead of where they are or to get ahead of the fugitives and wait for them to arrive in their trap.

Good fortune smiles on team two. As they cross the projected vector, there is no sign of the bad guys. Either they changed directions or the team is now ahead of its prey. Team members radio back their coordinates so the other pursuers know exactly where they are. No friendly fire incidents can be expected.

One of the trackers spots movement about one-quarter-mile ahead. Through the binoculars, they see the two men sitting, catching their breath. The tactical team is sent to both sides to flank them. The trackers move in slowly from behind. The second team closes off the only route of escape. The fugitives are surrounded and do not know it yet. The trackers crawl into position. The snipers are ready with covering fire from the rear. As they get close, one of the trackers calls out to the two men. "Drop your weapons, you are surrounded!" After

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their initial surprise and a fleeting thought of an attempt to run, they lay down in the grass and surrender.

No lives are lost. No shots are fired. Bad guys are captured.

Developing a tactical tracking team

Developing a tracking element within a tactical response team is not an insurmountable task. In fact, with approximately two weeks of intensive training, it is possible to develop an operationally effective tracking team.

Typical training includes tracking team movement, two-team movement and communication and coordination with the command post. Students should practice methods for staying on the trail, movement and camouflage techniques to significantly reduce presence on the trail, as well as awareness techniques that reduce the chances of ambush. Students should participate in tracking situations that become increasingly more challenging and develop confidence in the team's ability to pursue and capture a fugitive.

At least a month of practice is recommended before moving on to a second phase of training in which tracking teams should learn night tracking, additional communication and coordination skills and anti- and counter-tracking techniques that may be deployed against them. Most importantly, students should practice tracking in more challenging scenarios that will validate their abilities and further increase their confidence.

A tactical tracking team should also be trained in a number of other skills that would be useful in tactical response situations. This includes rural reconnaissance operations such as drug labs or drug fields. Their training would also be useful in search and rescue situations, finding lost hunters, hikers or children. Finally, trackers

can be used in crime scene investigations, providing forensic tracking of a crime scene, determining how many people were present, where they went and what they did.

Benefits of tactical tracking to agencies

- Ability to leverage their tactical teams
- Ability to recover a fugitive, ensuring officer safety
- Ability to focus assets where they are most effective
- Ability to reduce the amount of man-hours involved in a search or fugitive recovery

Tracking teams can save money and lives

Tracking has been making a comeback in law enforcement circles in recent years thanks to the hard work of such pioneers as Tom Brown, Ab Taylor, Joel Hardin, Charles Worsham and David Scott-Donelan. Today, many tactical teams are learning what used to be a dying art and are saving lives and resources in the process. Even in urban and suburban settings, tactical teams with tracking elements are finding that there are many situations where tracking is a valuable skill. ◀

About the author

Kevin Reeve is an accomplished tracker and teacher. He has participated in dozens of tracking cases, finding lost hikers, hunters and children. Reeve has worked as a consultant on several police investigations leading to the capture of perpetrators. He has taught tactical tracking for law enforcement jurisdictions around the country, including several federal agencies. He has also taught elite military groups including elements of the U.S. Special Forces, Navy SEALs, Rangers and Marine Force Recon. For more information on tactical tracking, Reeve can be reached at 609-668-5384.

Recommended reading

- "Tactical Tracking Operations" by David Scott-Donelan
- "The SAS Guide to Tracking" by Bob Cars
- "The Science and Art of Tracking" by Tom Brown
- "Case Files of the Tracker: True Stories from America's Greatest Outdoorsman" by Tom Brown