

Protecting Paradise

by Thomas M. Iannucci

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Even in a place as idyllic as the island of Kauai, police officers have to prepare for any threats the world outside may bring.

Given Kauai's picturesque beaches, lush tropical interior and million-plus visitors a year arriving from all over the world on commercial airliners, cruise ships, private jets and yachts, along with its diverse multi-ethnic island residents, the Kauai Police Department (KPD) faces unique challenges.

By urban standards Kauai is a small community of 65,000 people living on an island of about 552 square miles with 111 miles of coastline. We're the northernmost of the Hawaiian islands and we're known as the "Garden Island," thanks to green landscapes that are so dramatic that they've been used in numerous movies, including "Jurassic Park."

Kauai has an operating police force of approximately 125 officers, but its diverse ethnic and cultural population requires that KPD stay on the cutting edge of its training regimen.

KPD has developed a training program that is uniquely Hawaiian—but which may hold lessons for other similarly diverse departments.

Understanding the need

In 2007, I attended the Hawaii State Law Enforcement Officers Association's annual conference as Kauai County police commissioner. At that meeting, a presentation by retired Army Sgt. Maj. Bill Barcher of Hard Tactics Corp., Las Vegas, Nev., was particularly riveting. This 30-year Army veteran, intelligence analyst and former Special Operations Forces team leader posed a question: "What would you do if a small, well-armed group of, let's say, Filipino Islamic fundamentalists launched an attack on your island?"

Just as we all began to scan our thoughts, he answered the question as well: "You would initially respond with squad cars, 9mm hand guns and eventually a special services team, but you would not be trained or prepared to engage them."

He was right.

Although the particular scenario that Barcher mentioned had never entered my mind as a commissioner, it was in fact quite possible given the spread of Islamists throughout the Pacific region. Extremists could easily plant themselves in Hawaii's local communities.

If Barcher's scenario unfolded, we would, of course, respond as we had been trained to do. It brought to my mind the botched 1997 bank robbery in North Hollywood, Calif., where two well-armed and well-prepared gunmen held a very alert and brave Los Angeles Police Department at bay for quite some time. The perpetrators managed to cause a lot of chaos and wounded many officers and civilians in the process before they were taken out and the situation was under control.

That was two well-armed men in body armor on an impromptu getaway. What would it be like for Kauai if a small group of moderately armed Islamists or extremists conducted a coordinated attack against something like a cruise ship, major resort, National Guard facility or tourist location? It would be like any other place and our officers would simply respond the way they were trained to. It made more sense to prepare them to face the possible challenges effectively, utilizing proven tactics and maneuvers that our military has perfected over the last few years.

Thinking out of the box

After hearing Barcher's scenario, I needed the answer to the obvious question: Are our officers being technically and tactically trained to engage a small, well-armed, hostile group intent on causing harm or destruction in our jurisdiction? I found out very quickly that KPD had already begun to implement this technical and tactical training.

Fortunately, KPD benefited from the fact that Barcher relocated to Kauai as a permanent resident. Also, an officer who knew Barcher from their service together in Iraq brought him to the attention of Deputy Chief Lt. Mark Begley, who decided to incorporate Barcher's and Hard Tactics' lessons into the KPD.

"We needed to be prepared for both domestic and international terrorism," Begley told me at the time. "Kauai would be an ideal staging area for terrorist activity or global insurgency. We have cruise lines, direct flights to the mainland, heavy tourism and military installations. Small agencies need to be just as concerned as anyone else."

Begley stepped out of the box on this one by incorporating private military tactical trainers to help prepare his officers. He simply saw it as an opportunity. Using private courses—especially military-style training—is not always popular with law enforcement departments, which fear being perceived as over-militarized. But Begley responded: "We're learning from the military because they're the best trained and the most experienced. We're not trying to become the military but utilize their expertise in this area as it best suits our needs." It's a distinction that's important to the civilian population.

One of the things that attracted Begley to this type of training was the need in today's military to deal with Islamist insurgents while also being mindful of the civilian population. He felt this kind of expertise was something very useful to local law enforcement. So he contacted Barcher and his partner, who was the former commander of the Honolulu Police Department's Special Weapons Action Team. "There was that perfect mix of military and civilian," Begley recalled. "That was a plus."

Barcher trained the KPD in areas like tactical weapons training, active shooter response, tactical leadership, quick repel, tactical swimming, coastal insertion, population control, hostage rescue, individual officer movement and control measures and predictive intelligence.

The support

KPD Chief Darryl Perry also saw the training as useful for the department. "The training they provide for our officers is vital, in my opinion," he commented. "As long as there's a threat, a very credible threat, which I believe there is today, we need to adjust our tactics and we need continuous training. You have to understand that our department, as we move forward, will have people come and go and we need to ensure that the new generation of officers is trained to understand the threat that's here today. So we must be vigilant at all times."

Perry also had a global perspective and valued the experience of military veterans. "We're a much smaller world than we were 10 years ago, five years ago," he said. "We have officers who are in the National Guard or have military ties, so they bring home what they've learned and share their experiences with us. They understand the need not to be complacent and being prepared, and this knowledge trickles down to the rest of us."

Edward Kubo Jr., the United States attorney general for the District of Hawaii, concurred with the chief, telling me: "We've already benefited from the military because there are many within our ranks who are in the military reserves. These officers have brought back to us their experiences in urban warfare, which is helping us learn about certain tactics enemy combatants use." He pointed out the similar experience and training that Vietnam veterans brought back with them when they entered into law enforcement back in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Kubo saw incorporation of military-style training as not only valid but necessary. "I definitely agree that training in such tactics is advantageous for our law enforcement community because we can never predict how a certain confrontation will play out. We need all the tools and training that we can use to defeat whatever hostile situation may face us. There's ample justification for the need for such training."

He didn't see an immediate terrorist threat to Hawaii, but acknowledged the threat throughout the Pacific region. "In our line of work today, we're not only local police dealing with local concerns or crime. We're global because we need to stay abreast of the threats out there that are trying to enter US shores." He was quick to add, "But, as always, nothing in life is certain – and although we're confident about our abilities, there's always a chance that something could slip by."

Both Kubo and Perry also pointed back to the North Hollywood incident as a reminder of the need for our officers to have tactical training and readiness.

Current Mayor of Kauai Bill "Kaipo" Asing, also the long-serving county council chairman, is on board, too: "The role of a police officer has changed dramatically over time," he told me. "An officer can no longer only be concerned about what's happening in his community or state. These days, police officers must be aware of what's happening globally and be prepared to face an array of challenges that could come from near and far."

Asing saw military-style training as an extension of their regular duties. "I think that in order to fulfill their commitment to 'protect and serve the public,' police officers must receive the training necessary for them to do their jobs; particularly in light of global terrorism. Although we live in paradise, what happens around the world certainly has an impact on Kauai."

Perry agreed: "Whether it's Filipino, Korean, Asian or whoever, because we can't paint an individual as a terrorist or paint an individual as an Islamic extremist, we

just have to be ready all the time. So we have to address that and we have to prepare our officers for something of that nature.”

Diversity in training

Barcher emphasized the need to consider the surroundings and each individual department’s possibilities. “Local law enforcement needs to identify real and potential threats,” he said. “They also need to determine what the police actions to those things will be and what the citizens’ response will be, as well.”

Currently, KPD is actively incorporating various local scenarios and landscapes into its training. This includes rappelling into the remote valleys in the island’s dense tropical rain forest to deal with marijuana eradication and drug traffickers and utilizing the local high school and court building for “active shooter” scenarios.

Perry is also looking at Kauai’s cruise lines and major hotels to see if they will accommodate KPD for hostage rescue training or terrorist attack scenarios. Lt. Ezra Kanoho, head of training, has picked up where Deputy Chief Begley left off and maintains the training for the department. In August he arranged for KPD’s Special Services Unit to complete a tactical swimmers course, which included coastal insertion training and incorporated the US Coast Guard detachment stationed at Kauai’s Nawiliwili Harbor.

Barcher “helped us build a working rapport with the Coast Guard and it will open the doors up for more opportunities,” Kanoho told me. He feels that bringing more military experience to the department “is a good thing.”

Analysis

As I realized during last year’s conference, our law enforcement agencies and officers will respond the way they were trained to respond, so the key to successful security is successful training. Here on Kauai, we’ve successfully adapted our training to local conditions.

It may be hard to imagine a threat in a setting as beautiful, lush and remote as Kauai, but we’re also aware of our place in a larger—and, unfortunately, dangerous—world. No matter how small and local our law enforcement concerns may be on a daily basis, our officers need to be aware that we’re part of that much larger world and prepare for anything it may send our way.

We’re learning from the military, from veterans, from private security companies and from any other source we find and we’re becoming more tactically and technically proficient, able to tackle any situation that comes our way. We’re identifying potential threats and vulnerabilities and getting stronger and sharper in

responding to possible crises. It takes a lot of security to keep paradise paradisiacal, but here on Kauai, we're doing it every day.

Aloha.

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