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SINCE
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RCMP 'DREAM' TEAM

60 highly trained officers
make up elite weapons
and tactical response unit
pages 8-10

FINANCIAL HELP URGED
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page 3

ERT confidential

Behind the scenes with the RCMP's elite special weapons and tactical force



Above: Sgt. Rob Tan (aka 'Tan Man'), an Emergency Response Team (ERT) leader, puts on camouflage face paint in preparation for bush warfare training near Cultus Lake. Below: Geared up in body armour and Kevlar helmets, ERT team members check their weapons to ensure they're clear of live rounds before starting combat training exercises.

by Ryan Starr

Early on the morning of April 12, 2006, the RCMP's Emergency Response Team (ERT) stormed a Surrey home where Graham McMynn was being held captive.

McMynn, a 23-year-old University of B.C. student at the time, had been abducted at gunpoint by a pair of thugs in Vancouver eight days earlier.

Eventually he was taken to a nondescript two-storey house on 76 Avenue near 146 Street.

At the trial that led to the conviction of three of his captors, McMynn testified he was asleep in a basement suite when the ERT launched their assault.

It was one of 14 simultaneous raids carried out in Surrey, Vancouver and Nanaimo at locations police believed the young man might be.

McMynn awoke to the piercing sound of an exploding flash-bang grenade.

A breacher then smashed down the heavy wood door with a battering ram.

With that the ERT flooded in, ushering a startled McMynn to safety and placing five men under arrest.

"It unfolded pretty smoothly," recalls Cpl. Howard Lew, who was on the operation that day. "It was

less than a minute from the time we hit the door to the time he was secure and everybody was in custody."

The raid was a dramatic climax in one of B.C.'s most high-profile abduction cases, the culmination of an immense police investigation that involved upwards of 400 officers across the region.

It also showcased the prowess of the Lower Mainland District ERT, the Surrey-based elite special forces unit tasked with carrying out the RCMP's riskiest operations.

Amid the jubilation following McMynn's rescue, though, the ERT garnered only a passing mention.

As far as Sgt. Rob Tan is concerned, that's just fine.

"We might not get credit for what we do," he says, "but if the exact same plan went sideways, then *that* would be on the front page – and my career would be over."

Tan, an ERT unit leader, calls this the "hero to zero" factor – one reason why the team prefers to fly under the radar. But for several weeks this fall, the ERT allowed a newspaper reporter and photographer to go behind the scenes with them, pulling back the veil to offer *The Leader* a rare glimpse into the specialized training of this high-calibre tactical team.

"As far as police tactics go, the ERT is the highest level there is in our line of work," says Tan. "We're living the dream."

Shooting to win

It's a little past noon on a drizzly Halloween day at the RCMP's Pacific Region Training Centre in Chilliwack.

Sgt. Tan – known as "Tan Man" by his men – rolls up in his black Chevy Suburban to greet a visiting reporter.

His squad is scheduled to do a full day of training, but they're running a bit late. Hours before they had executed a high-risk search warrant at a drug house in Surrey. (Nothing unusual: they arrested two and seized a sizable stash of drugs and weapons, including a sawed-off pistol-grip pump-action shotgun).

Tan arrives at the firing range where ERT members are getting set to practise combat shooting – or as he puts it, "shooting to win a firefight."



■ Photos by Evan Seal



Above left: ERT members storm a room to search for 'enemy targets' as part of close-quarter combat training. Right: ERT sniper Const. Steve Croft dons a ghillie suit (twigs, grass and leaves woven into netting) to blend in with the natural surroundings. Below: The men suit up for outdoor training near Chilliwack.

From page 8

The men gear up in double-body armour and Kevlar helmets and load their weapons of choice: a Smith & Wesson 5946 pistol and an MP-5 submachine gun.

They start off firing at targets from close range, then work on pivoting and shooting. They rotate around 180 degrees, turn suddenly and hit their marks spot-on.

"It's about the ability to identify the threat from whatever position you're in and whatever direction you're moving," Tan says.

The idea is to operate on instinct.

"You decide whether it's a lethal force threat or not and engage it effectively," he says. "But you have to do it quickly, before that person can get a shot off on you."

While the team is trained to use lethal force, the hope is that the situation doesn't warrant that.

"Sometimes people think that when the ERT arrives, you've just activated the killing machine," Tan says.

"But everything we do – our training and tactics – is designed to de-escalate or prevent an escalation of force."

Moving back 25 metres, the ERT members offer an impressive demonstration of marksmanship.

First they shoot pistols using non-dominant hands – in case the good one ever got hit. Then they fire rounds while lying on their sides.

However awkward their positioning, none of the bullets miss. Indeed, at the far end of the range the paper-man target's head and chest are riddled with holes.

As well it should be. In this business, accuracy is everything. One errant round could mean the loss of innocent life or the injury of a fellow team member.

"We're responsible for every bullet we shoot, every movement we make," Tan says. "If my shot isn't exactly where it's supposed to be, then it's not going to work – someone's going to die."

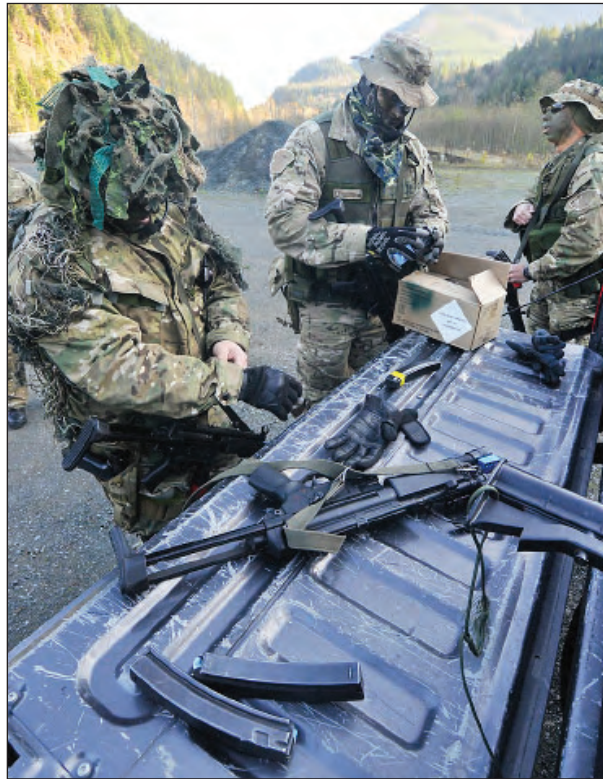
Such marksmanship doesn't come easy. It's usually what trips up those aspiring to join the ERT.

Tan recalls a time when a group of 18 hopefuls showed up for an 8 a.m. tryout. By 10 a.m., three remained.

"If you miss a shot, you get one chance to remedy that," Tan says. "If you miss it again, you're gone. There's no reason to miss. It's unacceptable."

ERT evolution

Insp. David Debolt is sitting in his office at the Surrey RCMP headquarters, a two-way radio buzzing on the desk behind him.



Debolt, the ERT commander for the entire Lower Mainland District, is monitoring the real-time progress of a raid Tan and his men are on that morning.

All is expected to go as planned. But in the event things were to heat up – say an ERT sniper needs the command to take out a bad guy – the chief is standing by.

Debolt has witnessed the evolution of the ERT from its inception in the mid-1970s.

The team was designed to be a police force with the type of advanced weapons and tactics training to respond to high-risk situations such as armed robberies, hostage takings and dangerous warrant executions.

The ERT was modeled on the RCMP's Ottawa-based counter-terrorism force of the day, the Hostage Assault and Rescue Program.

For decades, the Lower Mainland ERT was a mixture of general duty officers scattered throughout the region. Members did the job part-time, more or less off the sides of their desks.

"The difficulty was if you were investigating a homicide, or were on an active surveillance, you wouldn't be able to attend (ERT) training days," Debolt says. "So training started to fall off the table."

The inconsistency of the ERT's reaction time was an added problem.

"Because it was all done on pager, there was no guarantee what kind of a response you'd get," Debolt says. "Until (members) started to show up, you didn't know how many you'd have."

As gangs and weapons continued to proliferate across the Lower Mainland, and violence on the streets worsened, it became clear a part-time ERT would no longer suffice.

In 2005, Debolt authored a business case underlining the need for a full-time ERT that could respond to the growing criminal threats.

RCMP senior management concurred, as did the three levels of government. Thus began a three-year roll-out of the full-time force.

"Quite frankly, the business case would never have been approved if we hadn't been able to show the increase in risk to the public and the (RCMP) members by not having this," Debolt says.

The only hurdle, of course, was funding.

The partners eventually agreed upon a formula: 50 per cent of the ERT's operating budget comes from municipalities, 30 per cent from the province and 20 per cent from the feds.

This year marks the final stage of the full-time ERT implementation. And Debolt couldn't be happier with the way things have progressed.

He now oversees the nation's largest full-time ERT – an elite weapons and tactical force that's well-equipped to defuse any crisis, 24/7.

"I got everything I asked for," Debolt says. "Not a lot of managers can say that."

ERT: Members adopt 'warrior mentality'

From page 9

Combat up close

The abandoned old school building is cold and damp, with only the occasional sliver of faint morning light breaking through its dirty windows.

In teams of four, ERT operators shuffle down the darkened hallways in search of enemy targets.

Welcome to close quarter combat training.

In each room they enter, the members scan for threats. When they spot them, they pepper the paper targets with 'Simunition' rounds – real bullets with wax tips to render them less deadly in case of an accidental hit.

Afterward they debrief with Sgt. Tan, going over the highs and lows of their performance.

"No one walks away from a debriefing feeling good," Tan says. "Because you never get better if you don't."

The Lower Mainland ERT is made up of three units of 20 men each that operate on a rotating schedule.

One unit works days, the other nights.

When not on ERT business, members are out on regular police patrols.

Meanwhile, a third squad has a week of mandatory training.

This includes work in a variety of areas: close quarter combat; bush warfare; even practising laying siege to drug ships or hijacked aircraft (Vancouver International Airport is within the ERT's jurisdiction).

"It builds cohesiveness," Tan says of the regular training. "If we face something we haven't faced before, we know instinctively how each of us is going to move and work."

It's a far cry from the part-time era when ERT training was done two days a month.

"If you missed training because of work, that meant you might not have shot for six to eight weeks," Tan says.

"Say we're going to rescue a hostage, and it's your mom or sister at gunpoint. Do you want that guy going in and making that one critical shot?" He pauses. "I wouldn't."

Warrior mentality

Rob Tan joined the ERT in 1999 after nearly a decade in various other RCMP capacities.

He has provided security detail for visiting VIPs such as Prime Minister Stephen Harper, former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and the late Indonesian President Suharto.

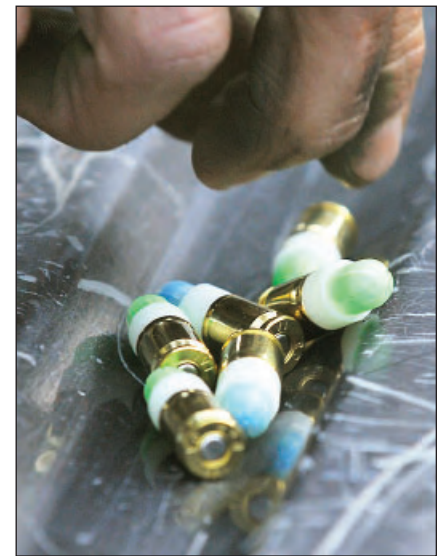
While almost 40, Tan is fitter than most men half his age. Like his colleagues, he augments his ERT training with a rigorous fitness regimen, either swimming, running or lifting weights six days a week.

And, in the unlikely event all his weapons were to fail, Tan has a back-up option.

He has a third-degree black belt in karate with a background in Muay Thai boxing – the scars on his head serve as a reminder of those scrappier salad days.

Not that he'd need to resort to hand-to-hand combat. Most "armed and dangerous" bad guys might talk a big game, Tan says, but usually end up proving no match for his well-trained team.

"They're bullies, and they only have power when they have other people to impress and prop them up," he says. "They play the role, but when the reality sets in and the cuffs are



Above: Sgt. Rob Tan hunts down a bad guy during bush warfare training. Top right: Simunition rounds – real bullets with wax tips. Bottom: An ERT member sports his blood type on his sleeve.

on, and they're going to jail and their world has crashed down around them, they cry like babies."

Despite the tough talk, Tan and his colleagues aren't afflicted by the sort of bravado you might expect from an elite team.

"It's a quiet confidence," Tan says. "We believe in ourselves, our teammates and our abilities."

ERT members know they're good at what they do. But they also know it's important to recognize one's limitations.

"You have to be humble," Tan says.

"Because the minute you think you know

everything, you're going to overlook something and get caught."

Ultimately, he says, the ERT members with the right stuff are the ones who embrace a "warrior mentality."

"The warrior mentality says you will get through this. And the guys will fight through anything because they know they can – because they have to. If the plan doesn't work, then we adapt and overcome," Tan says.

"But our worst day has to be better than the bad guy's best."

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