

Into the Great Abyss

SUGGESTED PROTOCOL FOR CLEARING ATTIC SCUTTLES

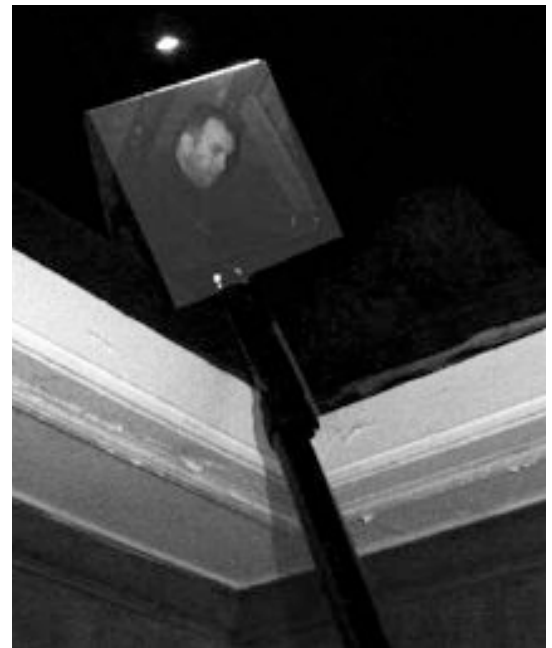
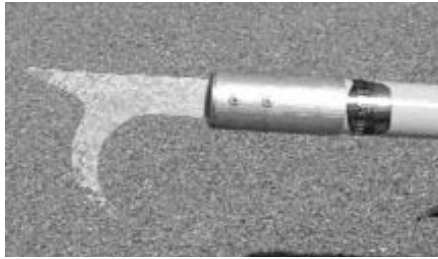
By Sgt. Paul J. Brandley Jr.

Having just executed a high-risk warrant and conducted a slow methodical search of the primary living area of a residence, your special response team still hasn't located the subject. The only place left to search is the attic—the ultimate fatal funnel. Following is a suggested protocol to be used when it's believed that a suspect is hiding or has barricaded himself in an attic.

First of all, officers should direct the suspect to surrender and come down from the attic through the use of strong verbal commands. If no response is received, the opening should be mirrored, searched with a pole camera and thermal imager if they are available. All of this needs to be done while other officers are covering the opening. To facilitate this, high intensity lights can be placed in the attic, using something like a Pike Pole, (aka fireman's pole). In addition to exclusively

utilizing the scuttle opening, if operators feel really sure that the suspect is in the attic, they can create small openings in various locations of the ceiling beneath the attic, throughout the rooms, in order to get better vantage points or angles with these devices. A fireman's pole or similar device can be used for this task as well.

As with all mirror and camera work, operators should not expect to see a whole person in front of them, but instead should be looking for pieces of a person,



Suspect hiding in attic is detected through the use of a light equipped mirror, without exposing operators.

a finger, hand, foot, elbow, etc. In addition, the operator should be looking for things which are out of place or have been disturbed, such as insulation, scuff marks on the wall beneath the attic door, indicating a suspect could have climbed through the opening, and marks left where dust was disturbed. If the suspect has refused to come out, or he could not be located with the search devices, verbal warnings should again be given. The suspect should be advised that his failure to comply will result in the use of chemical agents and possible damage to the home. When the suspect fails to respond to this command, the situation should be treated as a barricaded subject and chemical agents should be deployed into the attic. This should be followed with verbal commands directing the suspect's actions. As in all barricaded situations, if no response is received, more chemical agents should be introduced. It should be noted, that if a Sting ball device is utilized to dislodge a suspect fire apparatus should be on hand for the potential fire.

In the event this has not dislodged the suspect, it may become necessary to make entry into the attic. However, prior to any entry, another search should be made with mirrors, a pole camera and the thermal imager. Since most state building codes require the access to an attic to be a minimum of 30 inches by 22 inches, it may be necessary to increase the size of the opening to the attic prior to entry. This will allow a bigger work area for cover officers and entry personnel and permit two operators to occupy the opening



View from the suspect's angle, of attic being searched with a pole camera. Note suspect has no view of personnel.

simultaneously. A larger opening may also make it easier to utilize a ballistic shield if so desired. As with any room entry, a minimum of two officers should be utilized to search the attic. Due to the confined environment in which the officers will be working, they may wish to strip down to soft body armor instead of a tactical vest and use their handgun instead of a long gun. Hopefully the handgun will be equipped with a mounted light.

There are several hazards that officers must be aware of when entering the attic, requiring them to think spherically. In an unfinished attic space, operators will need to be conscious of their footing and be sure that they step on the ceiling joists. If they fail to do so this, they may fall through the ceiling beneath them. This can be a complicated task when one is working in poor light, wearing a gas mask and attempting to scan the environment for the suspect and other potential threats. In addition to limited footing, officers have to be conscious of their overhead space, due to the pitch of the roof, so that they don't strike their heads on roof joists or other items which may be hanging from the attic ceiling. Again, operators are paying attention to all of these hazards while trying to locate a potentially armed suspect.

In addition to these environmental risks, operators need to be concerned with the corners of the attic space, for these are likely to be the most shadowed and darkest areas where suspects may hide. There are also the more obvious hiding places such as behind chimneys, air conditioning units and duct work, or beneath insulation. Suspects have been known to hide beneath insulation near the eaves or exterior vents to get a supply of fresh air, and minimize the effects of any chemical agents.

A final option, based upon the situation, may be dismantling the ceiling beneath the suspect, if his general location has been determined. This minimizes the risk to operators, by not entering the attic. The price of sheet rock, plaster, and a little bit of wood is a small cost for officer safety.

In the event the suspect initially responds to verbal commands, or decides

to do so after the deployment of chemical agents, prior to the team making entry into the attic, the suspect should be allowed to exit the attic on their own. The reason for this is if entry has not been made, the area the team is responsible for controlling is much smaller. Basically, officers will only have to worry about the attic opening, and can set up for the apprehension from positions of cover and concealment, as well as have officers prepositioned to act as handlers once the sus-



Operator prepares to search attic with lighted mirror, while another officer provides cover with a shotgun.

pect has exited. By limiting the team's area of responsibility, and bringing the suspect into their area of control, rather than entering his, they are placing themselves in a position of advantage. This exodus is controlled through strong verbal commands, and handled in the same manner as a high risk car stop, with only one officer giving direction to the suspect. Once the suspect is in custody, a physical search of the attic will still be necessary to search for other possible suspects, or potential evidence.

If the suspect has refused to come out, causing the entry team to go into the attic to locate him, he should be kept in place, unless there is a compelling reason not to. He should be proned out on his stomach and directed to turn his head away from officers and place his arms and hands out to the sides, or on his head. The officers

should now utilize the principles of contact and cover, and approach the suspect, so as to maintain a weapon on him, and place him in restraints.

There are several reasons why officers should approach the suspect. First, if we have deployed chemical agents, we most likely have temporarily deprived or impaired the suspect's vision. This will make it extremely difficult to call the suspect toward the officers, for it is difficult enough to walk on ceiling joists with normal vision, much less vision affected by chemical agents or OC. Secondly, by having the suspect proned out, he does not have a stable platform from which to initiate a physical assault. When the suspect is proned out, any movement is easily detectable. This, coupled with the fact that they are looking away from the officers, places them in a position of disadvantage, giving the officers greater control.

As with all barricaded subjects, we want to use tactics which place us in a position of advantage and the suspect at a disadvantage. Dynamic tactics are not a viable option when dealing with an attic scuttle or pull-down stairs. It would be extremely difficult to maintain the three necessary components of a successful dynamic entry; speed, surprise and diversion, when making entry into an attic, thereby placing operators in a position of disadvantage. The use of these tactics is intended to minimize

the risk of serious injury to officers who may be called upon to search for a possibly armed suspect secreted in one of the worst possible places. ☆

About the Author

Paul Brandley is a patrol sergeant with the Pawtucket, RI Police Department and a Team Leader/Training Coordinator on the Special Response Team. Sergeant Brandley has a Master's Degree in Criminal Justice and has been in law enforcement for 12 years. He holds instructor certifications in MP-5 Subgun, Patrol Rifle, Defensive Tactics, Rapid Deployment Techniques, and currently serves as Vice President for the Rhode Island Tactical Officers Association.