

Portland Police Bureau: SERT, Circa 1970's

The Red Lion Hotel

*(Note: Identities of police officers listed in the narrative below have been changed.)

The Red Lion Hotel was located in Southwest Portland, on the South edge of the city center. Today, SERT received a call-up on a robbery *gone bad*, now a **“hostage-situation.”**

My pager went off while I was at home. SERT members were subject to call-out via “telephone pager.” I had my unmarked police surveillance vehicle—as did all other team members—loaded with equipment. My car was with me twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. We were expected to respond at any time of day, from anywhere—unless excused for vacation, or the like.

I returned the page call to the 911 Bureau of Emergency Communications Center (BOEC) according to procedure. The supervisor described the situation.

“It’s a hostage situation. Red Lion, SW 4th and Lincoln. The district car responded to a robbery call, went to the reception lobby of the hotel and found it vacant – nobody there, the lobby open, hotel desk insecure. Nobody there. Right after that, we got the call at 911, from a man who claimed to be the robber; said he had twenty hostages in a room off the lobby; said he knew the police were outside; said if they attempted to come in, he would shoot one of the hostages. We could hear a female crying in the background. Then the man hung up.”

Ray, your supervisor says you are to report to the Denny’s Restaurant, a restaurant in the same mall center as the Red Lion. There is cover and concealment if you approach the restaurant from the northwest. Park on the west side of Denny’s. FYI, the Patrol Division Command Center will be at the Towers, SW 3rd and Harrison.”

I confirmed I would respond immediately to the scene,

“Okay, on the way. Have you made contact with the other SERT members? Who’s in command at the scene? Sgt. Sullivan? Has a perimeter been established?”

BOEC SUPERVISOR: “Three of you have called in; ...waiting on the others. Sgt. Sullivan is the Tactical Commander; he is enroute, on net (radio channel) six. Captain Fredricks is On-scene Commander, and is there now. Perimeter has been established by uniform (District Patrol Officers).”

“Okay, I’m enroute, ETA twenty minutes.”

I was familiar with the robbery location. Denny’s, at SW 4th and Lincoln, was our SERT “coffee stop.” On uneventful days, when our roll call adjourned, SERT members went directly to “4th and Lincoln” for coffee. The staff knew us well and on this day, it was different, the restaurant willingly shutdown to accommodate our emergency operations.

As I arrived, SERT Officer Bo Givens pulled up at the same time. Three other teammates were already suiting up; were out on their pre-operations missions almost before I could get in my gear. Our gear: *Black jumpsuits, jump boots, bullet proof vests, black knit hat, “packset” belt-holstered radios, hand-microphone and earpiece, rappelling gear, cartridge belts, 9mm S&W pistols. Additionally, we were all trained on the two AR-18 .223 caliber automatic rifle, the scoped .223 caliber bull nosed Remington Sniper rifle, the .307 cal Remington long rifle, the U.S. M1 .30 caliber Carbines, the Ithaca 12 gauge shotgun, the 37 mm gas gun, and various gas/smoke grenades and flash-bangs.*

SGT. BRAD SULLIVAN: “Hi Ray. Dress up. Grab your Carbine. We may have some short-range sniper stuff in there. Bo, you take the Rear Guard...take your Ithaca (12-gauge short-barrel shotgun loaded with double 00 buckshot.) Arnie Vulnar’s at the Command Center being briefed. Rich Watson and Dan Peller are both out scouting intel. Jim Farley is on standby. We will all meet for briefing in the lobby of Denny’s in fifteen .”

Fifteen minutes later, at the briefing, Sgt. Sullivan confirmed the 911-call information, “robbery call gone bad”; twenty or so hostages, all women, held and confined in a hotel meeting room up the hall from the hotel reception desk. Sgt. Sullivan reported that patrol units had checked the area for accomplices; finding none, had secured the hotel outer perimeter. They were also currently operating an inner perimeter post—the suspect’s only escape route. Next, SERT Officer Rich Watson—with results of his scouting mission—displayed a detailed map that he and Peller had developed, complete with all of the accessible entrances and exits, rooms, windows and doors—measurements included. Sgt. Sullivan, then, described a rescue plan that he and the SERT scouting officers had formulated. Lastly, a uniformed patrol officer presented the latest information from the inner perimeter post.

PATROL OFFICER: “Our post is actually feet from a doorway to the room where the suspect has the hostages. It’s a hotel meeting room. The only escape route is the door to the hallway we have secured. To our luck, the door is ajar one inch. It was so when I left five minutes ago. Apparently, the asshole does not know of the open door. He has made no movement in the direction of that door.

There is an officer in a stairwell across from the door of that hostage room now. That stairwell leads up another wing of the hotel, which is at 90 degrees to the wing of the hostage room. When I was there on that stairwell, a couple of minutes ago, I could see into the room. He was there with a gun to one woman’s head. She was whimpering. He was yelling into the phone.”

SGT. SULLIVAN: “Thank you, Officer. Okay, guys (Addressing SERT members), we’re going in right now. The Officer will lead us there. We may have to perform a rescue, upon arrival. But, if not, Vulnar, you will have ‘the sniper eye’. Take a position on the ajar door. Take the carbine with open site. You will have the suspect in your sites from a position of at maximum of 40 feet. You will see him through the cracked door. I want you on it, immediately, when we get there. Tell us what you see. Peller, you will prepare to lead the entry-assault with Vulnar on my command, if needed. Watson, you, Tercek, myself, and, Rear Guard, Givens will prepare for rescue. Rules of Engagement – On my command only. Okay, everybody on channel nine. Let’s go.”

There was no time for further planning. It had been almost an hour since the attempted robbery/kidnapping began. We were outside Denny's in seconds, marching along the west wall of the Red Lion building toward our entry location. Our communication was now restricted to channel nine—a "simplex" channel dedicated to SERT operations, with limited range of about a half mile. Enroute, the PPB Hostage-Negotiator, Detective Rob Ducane, notified Sgt. Sullivan from the Command Post (via the secured channel) that he had made telephone contact with the would-be robber-kidnapper. The kidnapper said he had a gun to one of the hostages' head. He would kill her unless we met his demands. An Officer on the outside also heard "**shouting and crying inside.**"

We saw and heard it all as we arrived on post. It was just as the Officer had described. Vulnar took the first position as ordered at the foot of the stairwell. We, the Assault and Rescue teams, took positions to Vulnar's side, stretched out along the railing up the hallway stairwell to the next wing. Vulnar could see the suspect through the crack in the door. Vulnar reported immediately that the asshole did not seem to know about the crack in the door.

VULNAR: Whispering. Looking over the top of his Carbine, directly through the open sights, reported into his remote radio mic strapped to his long shirtsleeve. "**Five-one. I have him. He is thirty feet in front of me. He is holding what looks like a 6-inch black .38 cal. Revolver. Has it at the head of a crying woman. He is a WM, 24 years, 5'9" black scraggly hair, mustache, red and black wool sweater, blue jeans. The door opening is enough. I have a clear head shot...waiting for an order.**"

My mind was racing. *Get ready! We're going in! Slow your breathing; clear your thoughts; keep eyes ahead; be aware of peripheral movements; ears on alert; stay on the ass of Watson; straight ahead; STAY low when we hit the door...*

...And in the next moment, surprisingly, NO ORDER!!! ...*COMMAND radio voice WAS SILENT!* Complete radio silence. Five seconds....*NO ONE RESPONDING...*

What was going on? Why didn't Sgt. Sullivan respond WITH THE ORDER to Vulnar? We all could hear this asshole kidnapper in the background yelling at the lady—GUN to her head. HE WAS GOING TO KILL HER! Why doesn't the sarge give the order to terminate the suspect? Vulnar has a shot he can't miss!

I could not see Sgt. Sullivan. He was up in front, at the foot of the stairwell, just out of my vision. *SOMETHING DIFFERENT WAS GOING ON. WHAT...?* Then, ten seconds, later—a light year for me—I heard him on the radio.

SGT. SULLIVAN: "**Five zero... Vulnar...Listen Up...permission to terminate, denied. All Units hold your position. All units stand by.**" And, again, to my surprise, I saw the sarge turn and race up the stairs passing by me, into the hallway of the wing above our stairwell.

He stopped at the top of the stairwell. I could hear his voice; I could see him talking into his remote mic. But, apparently, he was not on our radio channel. *Must be on the Command Post channel.* Just over a whisper, his voice was definitely elevated; his tone, terse. *Who was he talking to?* Two minutes later, Sgt. Sullivan came back down the stairs, red-faced. He stood behind our rear guard and spoke into the remote mic, this time on the SERT channel.

SGT. SULLIVAN: “Five-zero. All units hold your positions. Hold all fire – until my command. Units confirm.”

“Fifty-one, copy.”

“Fifty two, copy.”

“Fifty three, copy.”

“Fifty four, copy.”

“Fifty-five, copy.”

And he was silent again. Staring straight ahead.

We were all staring at him. It was clear the Rules of Engagement had changed. Sergeant Bradley Sullivan was no longer in command of SERT tactics. Somebody else was pulling the strings!

Minutes passed. Twenty minutes. Vulnar reported the hostage taker seemed passive for the moment. However, Vulnar also said the asshole continued to point his gun in the direction of the lady at his side. I watched Vulnar. He fidgeted a little as he spoke into his mic. His rifle was getting heavy, now. He was having difficulty holding it, keeping the sights on the suspect. Sgt. Sullivan must have seen it too.

SGT. SULLIVAN: “Five-zero to five-one..., you still on him?”

VULNAR (FIFTY-ONE): “Yes, Sir. ...I am seeing different woman; same threat, though; no changes on the suspect demeanor. He’s on the phone now. He still does not know we are out here. (...a two-second pause, mic still open) Any change in the Rules, Sarge?”

SGT. SULLIVAN: “No rules change.”

VULNAR (FIFTY-ONE): “Permission for relief of post, Sarge? This gun’s getting heavy.”

SGT. SULLIVAN: “Fifty two (Watson). Take the sniper position.” And Sgt. Sullivan was up again. Again, up the stairs past me, into the hallway of the wing above us...and he was back down a moment later.

SGT. SULLIVAN: “Five zero, no rules change. All units maintain status. Vulnar, see me over here at the top of the stairwell.”

Sarge told Vulnar *what he could not say on the radio*. The Deputy Chief (DC) was now the On-Scene Commander. He had arrived a half hour ago. He immediately relieved the Precinct Captain Fredricks. And then, worse. After conferring with Sgt. Sullivan, the DC also disagreed with Sullivan’s advice to terminate the suspect. He directed Sgt. Hill not to give the termination order, and took away Sgt. Sullivan’s discretionary authority as Tactical Commander.

Vulnar relayed the new info to us all, one by one.

The DC was unbelievable! He took away Sullivan’s command authority. How could he? How could he expect to make tactical decisions himself—decisions that most often, by their nature,

were spontaneous? How could he—from a Command Post a thousand yards from the action—make tactical decisions? Why would the DC gamble? SERT had attained the best tactical position for control over an unpredictable and volatile suspect. At any moment, the situation might deteriorate! Every passing moment without neutralizing this suspect (who was obviously angry and possibly deranged, was a gamble. I would certainly take this shot if my wife, son or daughter were the hostage—with a gun to their head!

The DC was risking innocent victim's lives. How could he take that risk? We had optimum control to handle the danger, with the suspect in our gun sights. Not one of us could miss from this range. We had trained to put a three-bullet pattern within a circle the size of a quarter, from as far away as a hundred yards. All of us had mastered the skill at this range to the size of a dime.

Notwithstanding the DC's authority, every SERT officer was prepared to shoot when given the command. We were ready to accept responsibility. Nevertheless, we would follow orders. We were professionals. Without question, we would stay within our role. We would risk life and limb to complete the mission, including cleaning up a Deputy Chief's mess. Now, though, it would all be DC's responsibility.

And Sergeant Sullivan? He now had a new set of tactical issues: How long can SERT members retain this tactical position? What new events should we anticipate next? What tactical contingencies should we prepare? What happens if we do not take this window of opportunity? What contingency plan can we develop to save lives?

Sgt. Sullivan's new orders to the SERT members: He would continue to communicate a description of the situation in detail for the DC. He would continue to change the sniper role every twenty minutes. At each rotation—with a fresh sniper on the mark—he would ask the DC for confirmation of the Rules of Engagement. Given that we still had the suspect in range, he would press the DC to give *the order to neutralize*.

The asshole changed gun victims whenever it suited him. And as time passed, he made new demands, **"...a car at the entrance in fifteen minutes"**; then **"...a bus with a driver and a small plane at the airport"**; and **"...500,000 dollars in a bag on the bus, ...or I will start killing..."** The PPB Hostage Negotiator, Ducane, put him off, changing the subject. The asshole became increasingly agitated when the negotiator changed the subject. And SERT officers waited... continuing to rotate the sniper position as ordered.

Our gun sights were on *him* every second; our trigger-pull at the ready. The asshole never shifted his gun from target either; never looked toward the door. Yet, *The Order* never came. At one point, the *asshole* grabbed at his victim—a grandmother-looking woman dressed in a royal blue flowered dress. She sobbed and sobbed as he pulled her violently off the chair. Falling off balance—held from a fall to the floor only by the asshole's left hand. As she fell, she raised her hands to her head, covering. And the asshole stuck the hard metal of the gun barrel to the back of her neck.

...in the next second,

ASSHOLE: Holding the .38 caliber long barrel revolver in one hand and picking up a telephone receiver in the other. **“I’m going to shoot her if you don’t get that bus here! Get it here, now!”**

Vulnar, who was now again in the designated sniper position with “the eye”, responded immediately, whispering into his remote mic,

VULNAR: “Fifty-One...I see the suspect agitated again...has the gun in the lady’s ear. He has a telephone at his ear; appears to be yelling. Moving like he’s going to shoot. Permission to neutralize?”

Three seconds later, Vulnar described the asshole pulling the gun away from the woman’s head and putting the phone down. Then, uncharacteristically, going quickly to her side, leaning toward her, and..., helping her gently to a chair.

DC (Now, apparently on the SERT channel, jumped in immediately): “All units maintain status! The Negotiator has it under control.”

There was the old SERT motto: “Time, Talk and Tear gas” (for the best outcome). However, experience taught us, SERT, the first element, “Time” is not necessarily or always on our side. Too little time, pushing the suspect—hastening to a rescue or assault—might make the outcome unpredictable and uncontrollable. Likewise, “Time” can affect *us*, too. Too much time, waiting too long to respond, can give us a diminishing capacity to react. Statistics compiled from outcomes of hostage situations around the world, told us that the potential for the best outcome would depreciate significantly after four hours. Given unstable and ever changing environmental, physical, and psychological conditions, any sudden behavioral change in the suspect may portend an undesirable outcome.

Nevertheless, more “Time” in this case did give Sergeant Sullivan and SERT members an opportunity to develop an alternative assault (entry) plan, **“...in case things go to shit.”**: 1) At the moment any hostage is injured by the hostage-taker—of course, on signal from the DC—Sgt. Sullivan will order a **rescue assault**. 2) Upon the command order to assault, The **Rules of Engagement** will give us direct authority to use **deadly force to neutralize** the suspect. 3) Bo Givens will lead with two flash-bangs (small, but loud explosive devices) to distract the suspect. We were to plan on the suspect not to give much notice to the first bang, but expect that he will be surprised by the second. 4) The assault team led by Peller will enter on the second flash-bang. The room will have a light haze for cover; just enough to confuse the suspect. We were to expect the suspect still to be standing—defending. 5) Peller and Vulnar will have to *find* him among the hostages—neutralize with a “head shot”—and do it within twelve seconds after entry. 6) The rest of the team will be charged with rescue. We were to expect that the hostages would be first to duck or go to the floor after the flash bangs. In only seconds after the bang, they will be first to get up and run toward the exit door. If Peller and Vulnar fail their mission, rear guard, Givens

will be task with rescue security. We, in rescue, will first, save as many lives as possible in the ensuing chaos. Second, neutralize the suspect.

The rescue-assault priority: 1) Hostages 2) Other citizens in danger 3) Police Officers 4) Asshole.

During the fourth hour, we could hear the asshole talking, again. He seemed to be calmer now. We could even hear some laughter—from the women! Then, normal conversation. Voice levels, tone, inflections—all normal. *It was almost eerie. They were all now talking normal with the asshole!*

Sgt. Sullivan relayed our observations to the DC in the Command Post. The Hostage Negotiator Ducane responded. He believed the “...**Stockholm Syndrome was now in play.**” He would continue negotiations.

“**Stockholm Syndrome**” is a term, psychologists first used in 1973, to categorize the unexpected and unusual reaction of hostages held during an incident in Sweden. During that incident, the hostages began to develop a friendly relationship with the hostage taker. So terrorized had the victims become, that now a psychological defense mechanism kicked in. The hostages were desperately looking for *any* acts of kindness from the hostage-taker, and he fulfilled their need. Seeing no escape from their terror, they now perceived the *asshole* as their only lifeline.

The DC’s message: SERT was now to expect that these hostages, in their extreme anxiety, had developed an empathy with *their* kidnapper; that we might even observe the hostages help or assist *their* kidnapper; that the hostages might even protect him if a SERT assault were to become necessary. Indeed, behavioral signs were evident. Time and fear had confused the victims’ perspective. We would have to adapt to circumstances. We had trained for just such a response.

Then, five hours after the incident began, word came from the Hostage Negotiator that the asshole was getting tired; weakening—asking for favors, now; not demanding. The Negotiator Ducane, conveyed that he had provided only limited food and soft drinks, yet received no complaint—as had been expected. When he matter-of-factly declined to provide requested alcohol. No complaint. To the Hostage Negotiator, these were new signs of submission—good signs for us.

Within the next half hour, the kidnapper offered to surrender. His plan: He would give his gun to a hostage. She would bring the weapon to us, waiting outside. He would release one hostage at a time. He would come out last.

NEGOTIATOR DUCANE (Now on the SERT channel): “**No, we want you to tell all the hostages to remain seated on the floor. Immediately after that, we want you to open the door into the hallway completely, and place the weapon on the ground. Step around the weapon and move forward into the hallway, hands over your head. Once you are two steps into the hallway, stop and stand in plain view. An Officer will be watching you. Remain**

standing, arms straight up over your head. Do not move. Follow the next commands of the Officer. He will not hurt you if you obey his commands. Understand, though, he will arrest you. You will not be harmed if you follow these directions.”

The kidnaper agreed to the terms.

Sgt. Sullivan ordered us to be ready. Immediately, he gave a hand signal to assemble to our established *Arrest Team/ Rescue Team* plan. The door opened. We stood at ready, weapons pointed. What we saw... was not anything like the Negotiator had ordered.

Four screaming women came quickly out, yelling, screaming at us! And more..., right behind..., struggling to break through—to get out! At first sight of the wall of women, the Arrest Team members broke off from the rest of the team in unison, hugging the wall to the right, moving toward the open door, hoping to surprise the asshole as he came through. From my position (Rescue Team), I could see a scraggly-looking male toward the back of the room, crouching in the midst of bunching, shoving women—those in front, still pushing forward vigorously in panic to get out.

It was *him!* I knew it! But I could not see the gun! The Assault Team was now in concealment, on either side of the doorway—which, unhappily, was now filled with panicked women. The Rescue Team stepped up directly, to confront the women and clear the doorway. Like other Rescue members, I grabbed at each screaming woman, and with a quick visual for weapons, pushed them toward the rear of our gauntlet to the waiting arms of the five detectives that Sgt. Sullivan had arranged on the stairwell behind the fray. Six, seven...eight women...And there it was...*the gun!* In the hands of a *fat woman* coming through the door opening right in front of the *asshole*.

FAT WOMAN: Screaming at us...shaking and shifting from one leg to the other, her head jerking right to left...and screaming more,

“Don’t hurt him...don’t hurt him...he didn’t do anything!!”

As she ranted, the Asshole when he came through the door opening in view of the waiting Arrest Team. Vulnar and Peller, surprised him—the asshole, trying to cower behind the ranting fat woman. Peller leaned into him, using the *asshole’s* forward momentum—Peller’s own right foot taken *said asshole*. The asshole’s feet came out from under him and he went to the floor. Vulnar and Peller had him controlled in three seconds; cuffed in ten seconds.

The Rescue Team had other business. *The gun*—in the hand of the fat woman. Several of us saw it—her hand, gyrating. Raising and lowering in sequence with her screams. She was hysterical.

“Put it down, miss...Put the gun down on the floor, NOW!”

It was no surprise to any of us when she did not comply. But she was soon to react as she focused intently on the three *Ninja-looking* men with guns in her face. Her reaction would determine her fate.

The *fat woman* jerked to a stop, losing her hysteria. She looked...well...terrified.

“No! No! ...” And she paused, staring. Her voice lowered. “I’ll do it, but...” Apparently, we had her attention. She lowered the gun to the floor, but made one more request before a detective handcuffed her...

“...Just don’t hurt *him*.” ...and the detective pulled her to the rear of the fray.

With the suspect and weapon now in custody, the team entered the hostage room, making certain there were no, yet undetected, threats remaining in the room. As per protocol, SERT entered the room in crouched positions, with guns menacing, searching for targets in every direction. It would be another—but the last—terrifying moment for five hostages who had remained in the room, trembling in the corner. A moment later, all clear—the Ninja-looking SERT team and the guns were gone. A semblance of order restored, it was now seven hours after the bungled robbery. Every hostage now safe, smiles, hugs and elation became the order of the day. The kinder gentler *Detective suits* moved in and took over the crime scene. The Deputy Chief, Precinct Captain Fredricks, and the Hostage Negotiator, Ducane, congratulated themselves...

...And the Special Emergency Response Team members followed their leader, Sergeant Bradley Sullivan, to Claudia’s Sports Pub to unwind.