

**THE POLICE
HOW-TO
GUIDES**

**HOW TO SEARCH FOR
CONCEALED SUSPECTS**

by Dean Scoville
POLICE MAGAZINE

www.PoliceMag.com

**dig
deeper**
READ OUR **HOW TO GUIDES**

 BOBIT BUSINESS MEDIA RESEARCH SERVICES

HOW TO SEARCH FOR CONCEALED SUSPECTS

Attics, basements, closets, and crawlspaces all present great hazards to officers searching for concealed suspects



For some of us fear of the dark is culturally indoctrinated. For others, it's an instinctual echo; the dark was threatening to our ancestors in ways that humans who live their nights under electric lights can barely understand.

Today, horror movie directors use our instinctual fear of the dark, toying with audiences before drawing back that curtain of night and revealing the monster so that the fans of such fare can go home having survived a vicarious thrill.

But when cops must face the unknown hazards concealed by the dark, we don't have the luxury of waiting for the credits to roll and the theater lights to come on. What we face in the dark is real and vicious. And the average citizen would be hard-pressed to imagine the fear we experience while poking our heads through a dark attic access or down a gloomy basement stairwell in hopes of divining a suspect's whereabouts.

For an officer, fear of the dark is both reasonable and prudent. Only God knows how many cops have peered into that darkness to find it split by an amber flash.

HOW TO SEARCH FOR CONCEALED SUSPECTS

One area of tactical concern is dealing with dark places where suspects often hide

The High Ground

Cops accept the prospect of working in oftentimes dangerous environs, and we train to minimize the risks associated with them. We familiarize ourselves with a variety of weaponry and tactics, practice both live fire and simulation round training, and are exposed to a variety of role playing scenarios. But if there is one area of tactical concern where most cops have perhaps been shortchanged, it is dealing with those dark places where suspects often hide.

Attics are particularly problematic. Not only do they give suspects the high ground and allow them to be anywhere within a 360-degree radius of a portal, but they often find searching officers backlit and precariously situated atop ladders.

Some officers don't get that far.

When officers of the Milwaukee Police Department's Tactical Enforcement Unit descended upon the house of a cop-hating recluse, they anticipated the possibility of being fired upon by the suspect. In a bid to get a bearing on the suspect, they inserted a mirror into the loft and saw that the man was in the process of lighting candles. Despite their attempt to back away, the man was able to douse the officers with a burning fluid. Three officers suffered first- and second-degree burns – two of them to their faces.

Those officers that succeed in gaining entry into attics run the risk of engaging suspects in close, confined quarters. For some, such confrontations have led to bodies crashing through ceilings and resulted in injuries to both the officers and the suspects.

San Bernardino (Calif.) Deputy Sheriff Luke Gayton's first attic entry was a memorable one. Gayton was one of several deputies who narrowed down a search for a domestic violence suspect to the man's attic. A neighbor had advised deputies that he thought the man may be armed, but wasn't sure as he'd never actually seen a firearm: Valuable information to have, but

HOW TO SEARCH FOR CONCEALED SUSPECTS

Deputies routinely deploy mirrors into attics before entering them

enough to rise to the level of a SWAT call-out. Requests to a local agency for a K-9 failed to secure one, and in the belief that he'd be able to obtain the quickest overview of the attic, the 6-foot, four-inch Gayton was selected to enter the attic first.

Gayton borrowed a tactical light from another officer, attached it to his gun, and entered the attic. The plan was that he'd search the east side of the attic while his partner would follow immediately thereafter and search the west side.

Gayton noticed footprints in the insulation and followed them. Twelve feet from the attic access, he found a pair of feet protruding from where the suspect had buried himself in the insulation. The suspect's refusal to obey Gayton's demands to show his hands resulted in Gayton deploying his TASER. But the TASER failed to establish contact, which gave the suspect the chance to sit up and point a gun at Gayton.

Yelling, "Gun!" Gayton fired twice at the suspect with his own sidearm. But while stepping backward, the deputy fell and struck his head on a roof joist.

When he saw Gayton fall, his partner thought that the suspect had shot Gayton and returned fire toward the suspect, who again pointed the gun at Gayton. Gayton then shot five more rounds, mortally wounding the suspect.

Gayton's experience illustrates many of the hazards of confronting a suspect in an attic. He dealt with confined spaces, architectural obstacles, ungainly footing, confusing acoustics, and a concealed suspect during his first attic search.

Gayton says the lessons learned that day were taken to heart by his agency. These days, San Bernardino County deputies routinely deploy mirrors into attics before entering them, and Gayton has since safely performed more than two dozen attic searches.

Agencies are also using tactical units more on attic searches. And a recent incident in Jonesboro, Ark., illustrates why that's a good idea.

HOW TO SEARCH FOR CONCEALED SUSPECTS

Basements appeal to those who wish to make their last stand because they have no means of escape

Jonesboro officers were after an armed rape suspect and they thought he was in a specific residence. They obtained a search warrant for the location and made entry. The search led them to believe he was hiding in the attic. A patrol officer went up through the attic opening where he was immediately fired upon by the suspect. The round was stopped by the officer's ballistic resistant vest and he was able to return fire, incapacitating the suspect.

Many experts believe a tactical team should have been called in on this operation. After all, most tactical teams have the weaponry, shields, and sophisticated surveillance tools such as pole cameras to mitigate the hazards of such a search.

Going Downstairs

Basements may provide insight to the men who exploit them. Such environments often appeal to those who wish to make their last stand because they have no means of escape.

The Beslan terrorists exploited the school basement during their assault on that institution. A basement was where cop killer Edward Nathaniel Bell barricaded himself after killing Westchester, Va., police Sgt. Ricky Timbrook. It was also a basement that afforded St. Louis County, Mo., Sgt. Richard Eric Weinhold's killer the vantage point by which to ambush the sergeant. In California, Joe Teitgen took refuge in a basement before suddenly darting out its door and shooting Vallejo, Calif., Officer Jeff Azuar in the head, killing him.

Don Alwes of the National Tactical Officers Association (NTOA) says that basements pose unique threats to police officers searching for concealed suspects.

"Probably one of the more dangerous situations is going down a stairway into a basement where the back side of the steps are not closed," Alwes explains. "If the bad guy is behind the stairs looking through and watching you coming down the steps, he's got a huge lead on you. The only safe way to do

HOW TO SEARCH FOR CONCEALED SUSPECTS

Determine if there is more than one means of entering or exiting the enclosure and what portals may give suspects an eye-line on officers

that is either crawling down on your belly-which isn't very practical-or to use a mirror to try to see behind the steps, or put eyes in that basement some other way. We don't always think about going down the stairs, particularly in a residence, as being a really dangerous situation."

Alwes cites the recent death of a Kentucky police officer who followed a domestic violence suspect down a basement stairwell. Seeing the officer from such a vantage point, the suspect was able to ambush the officer with an SKS rifle, killing him.

"The deputy got in over his head before he realized he'd been caught in that funnel, and he didn't survive it," Alwes says.

Recon and Tactics

When it comes to searching for suspects in dark and shadowy hiding places, mitigating an officer's chances of getting shot starts with getting the lay of the land. Officers want to determine if there is more than one means of entering or exiting the enclosure and what portals may give suspects an eye-line on officers. In dealing with apartments and condos, they need to know if attics or crawlspaces share common accesses. Many times, this knowledge is acquired only incident to a search of the target location. However, nearby buildings with similar floorplans may be used for recon as well.

Visually canvassing the location and recognizing red flags is imperative. Have cobwebs been disturbed around attic portals, or dust pooled on the floor directly below them? Has the trap door been haphazardly replaced or weighed down? Are doors, covers, and other barriers cracked open or bored in such a manner as to allow a suspect to see out, but to preclude an officer's ability to see in? Has the wire mesh covering a crawlspace access been removed or the ground near it been disturbed?

Answers in the affirmative may dictate a request for a tactical unit to handle the situation, particularly if the suspect is known or believed to be armed; more so if the suspect's flight was so effectively contained as to leave little doubt that he is in your containment.

HOW TO SEARCH FOR CONCEALED SUSPECTS

Officers should exploit high-tech alternatives before committing themselves to needless courses of action

An officer who fails to recognize the significance of attics, basements, and crawl spaces may be setting himself up for an ambush. Some will discount the confines as too constricting to accommodate a suspect. More often, they simply fail to look up and notice them.

During training exercises, former Fort Shawnee, Ohio, police chief Rick Rohrbaugh made a habit of dropping empty casings behind those officers who'd strolled beneath ceiling accesses and air conditioning units without looking up.

"Dropping an empty casing behind the students actually scared them worse than shooting a blank," recalls Rohrbaugh. "But by the time patrol tactics classes concluded, we had graduated bobble heads who'd learned to look up, down, and all around."

Looking up and recognizing a potential problem is a good start, notes NTOA's Alwes. Still, he cautions

"You have thermal devices that can locate sources of body heat; others that can pick up minute sounds. Throw robots and pole cameras have also determined whether or not a suspect was in a room," Alwes says. "They're even developing mechanical sniffing devices that will eclipse their canine counterparts in determining whether or not there's human life in an enclosed area."

Alwes adds that even in the absence of such high-tech hardware, cops should try verbal commands before making like Punxsutawney Phil, the famous Pennsylvania groundhog, and sticking their heads up through a hole.

"Sometimes simply yelling, 'Come on out, we know you're in there,' will get them out-particularly if you're threatening to put a dog in there with them," Alwes advises.

And as more than one cop has discovered, that dog need not necessarily be present.

HOW TO SEARCH FOR CONCEALED SUSPECTS

Many law enforcement agencies deem non-compliance with verbal commands as the threshold for pepper spray deployment

"My partner and I responded to a Burglary in progress at 4 o'clock in the morning," recalls retired NYPD officer Jim McDevitt. "We were faced with a pitch-black basement where we were pretty sure the suspect was hiding. At the time, only the bomb squad had a K-9 unit, but we suspected that our suspect wouldn't know that. So, my partner began calling down into the basement, 'Come on out or I'm sending the K-9 unit in,' while I started doing my best dog barking imitation. We got the suspect to come out with his hands up."

In those instances where "olly-olly oxen free" fails to garner the desired results, many law enforcement agencies deem non-compliance with verbal commands as the threshold for pepper spray deployment. Marinating a ceiling with PepperBall rounds or saturating an enclosure with OC spray can make things awfully uncomfortable for the people inside them.

Ed Santos, owner and founder of Center Target Sports and an expert in low-light tactics, suggests that police agencies consider exploiting the acoustics of such closed environs.

"The loud music and noise exploited by psy-ops units in the military can also work for us, as well. It can be exploited on multiple levels-working on the suspect psychologically and tearing at his eardrums, while simultaneously masking our breaching attempts and other efforts, as well."

One can only wonder how long some good ol' boy could hole up in a closet with Ghostface Killah's latest rap opus blaring at 170 decibels, courtesy of six 15-inch woofers and a couple of amplifiers propped up against the door.

Life and Death Decision

In those instances where a suspect's exact location is in question and patrol officers elect to search dark environs, illumination may prove to be the greatest equalizer.

HOW TO SEARCH FOR CONCEALED SUSPECTS

“The more tools that you have at your disposal – tools like infrared, heat sensors, remote cameras – the more you can start shifting the odds to your favor”

Santos has long been an avid proponent of tactical illumination, but he offers a caveat to officers as to their choice of lights, citing unanticipated dangers he and his training crew encountered in dealing with A-frame pitched roof attics. "They can create shadows-shadows which can conceal the bad guy's locations," Santos says. "And the shadow problem can be amplified when you're using strobe lights."

Santos recommends deploying very high-density directed light that will offer as diverse and spread out a pattern as possible and supplementing this illumination with other shielding tools such as portable ballistic shields and smoke.

"I've also seen some creative uses of chem lights," says Santos. "Face it. Because make no mistake about it. If there's someone up there, the odds are stacked up pretty high against you."

Because of what he has witnessed in training sessions, Santos figures that, at best, an officer has a 50-50 chance of guessing where the suspect might be in an attic. And given that every one of his students' attic entries resulted in officers taking hits – irrespective of whether or not the officers guessed correctly-Santos wonders who'd want to try and guess when it's real bullets instead of simulated rounds.

Fatal Funnels

The decision to enter a location is a complicated one. Having the wrong person make the entry can make it more so.

"Many people have phobias of crawlspaces and attics, and police officers are no exception," notes Santos. "We've encountered it in our training. You add the additional stress taken on by that officer as a result of a phobia, and you've really upped the ante for making an entry into an attic space. When even SWAT guys have involuntarily stood straight up and

HOW TO SEARCH FOR CONCEALED SUSPECTS

Should officers elect to make an entry on an enclosure, they may opt for diversions with flash-bangs or other devices

exposed themselves to gunfire after a mouse has run over their hand, you have to wonder how less tactically trained personnel might react."

Unfortunately, it is usually a less tactically trained officer doing the leg work on such searches.

A vast majority of the time, these searches are conducted without incident. Either the suspect isn't there, or he is discovered and placed under arrest. But often searches find officers confronting armed suspects hidden in attics, basements, and even closets.

Last year in the aftermath of killing two Oakland officers incident to a traffic stop, the shooter was able to ambush and kill still two more officers from a closet where he'd barricaded himself. Earlier this year, a Rockdale County, Ga., deputy became the first officer with his agency to die in the line of duty while searching for a suspect. Officers had cleared the bedroom and were just opening a closet door when the suspect opened fire from the darkness. Struck below his ballistic resistant vest, Dep. Brian Mahaffey was mortally wounded. The suspect was shot and killed.

"One of the things that we see is that when people go to open the closet, they stand right in front of it," observes Alwes. "They don't treat it with the same type of respect that they normally might for the front door. They're backlighting themselves and placing themselves smack in the center of the fatal funnel."

If officers are going to open closet doors, Alwes recommends that one stand to the side and open the door while another officer gets a view from a deeper part of the room.

Should officers elect to make an entry on an enclosure, they may opt for diversions, exploiting secondary entry portals to distract the suspect with flash-bangs or other devices.

If there is more than one ceiling access, one may be exploited as a diversionary device, committing an unseen suspect's attention toward it while entry is actually achieved via another entrance.

HOW TO SEARCH FOR CONCEALED SUSPECTS

"It comes back to the three Ts: time, tactics, and troops"

"It comes back to the three Ts: time, tactics, and troops," Alwes asserts. "Sometimes in our haste to catch the bad guy, we fail to honor that old axiom. If you really have him contained up there, what really is the motivation to having an officer stick his head through that opening? There's no hostage situation. He's not in a position to create more havoc. What's the motivation to go through there?"

Santos emphasizes that those agencies that don't have access to tactical teams really need to look hard at that question. Those that do have teams face an even tougher question: Why don't they allow the team to use their training and techniques during such incidents?

"There's always the option of bringing the ceiling down from under him. It just depends on the level you're willing to go to get him. You can bring the ceiling down rafter by rafter. It's very easy to take the drywall down. We've done it twice in houses that were ready to be destroyed. Tac teams have all the equipment. All of a sudden it gets really uncomfortable up there when you start pulling insulation out," Santos says.

Is It Worth It?

Alwes says there are two questions he has always asked himself before committing himself or his personnel to searches of enclosed venues: First, can I win? Second, is it worth it?

James Stalnaker, a retired captain from the San Bernardino (Calif.) Sheriff's Office and author of the excellent book "Building Search: Tactics for the Patrol Officer," hopes that cops consider Alwes' two-pronged question before taking action. For to Stalnaker's mind, if there is a greater danger than a lack of training, it is a lack of discipline in patrol officers.

"I'm talking about cops who are unable to control their adrenaline and their emotion," Stalnaker explains. "There's always a human factor that gets an officer hurt or killed."

HOW TO SEARCH FOR CONCEALED SUSPECTS

The cop Stalnaker fears most for is the one who may have had a suspect under control that got away from him. In trying to make some compensatory overture, the embarrassed officer may find himself getting in over his head. "The officer feels that he's been made to look bad in the eyes of his fellow officers," Stalnaker says, "and pride goes before the fall, as they say."

Despite mankind's historical fear of the darkness, there have always been those suspects who have exploited it to their advantage. But by anticipating their threats before they initiate them, we can help to ensure that their darkest hour doesn't become ours.