

Peter Stolwerk outlines the risks faced by operatives during tactical breaching operations, and explores how hydraulic breaching tools can save lives and help increase conviction rates

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Every day, police forces all over the world are faced with suspects who may be hiding in houses or business premises. In many cases these suspects are armed, on the run from the police or carrying out illegal acts when the team enters the building. For many decades, police forces have used various breaching tools in order to gain rapid access to houses and business premises.

Let us examine a scenario. A team of detectives gathers at a police station in the middle of the night, in the heart of the city. This team is specialised in detecting houses that are being used as drug dealing premises. Evidence against a suspected hard drug dealer has been gathered for several months. This dealer sells the drugs from his home and has been arrested by the police for possession of drugs on a number of occasions. Observation has revealed that a large number of people visit the house of the suspected drug dealer in the evening, and two people have been arrested for possession of drugs after visiting the house. After consultation with the public prosecutor, the decision was made to raid the house tonight. The goal is to arrest the suspect and to find drugs in the house if possible. These could subsequently be used as evidence in the legal proceedings. It is therefore very important for the team to surprise the suspect when the house is raided. This will enable the team to prevent the suspect from quickly getting rid of drugs and other evidence. The police have no indication that the suspect will resist arrest. There is also no indication that the suspect is in possession of a firearm.

The moment the team observed all of the lights in the house had been switched off and the suspect had probably gone to sleep, they gathered in order to prepare for the raid. The detectives started with an exhaustive briefing in which all of the facts relating to the suspect house were discussed. The decision was made to break the front door of the house with a "storm ram" – a long iron pipe weighing around 20 kilograms. As soon as the house was open, the detectives would enter as quickly as possible in order to arrest the suspect.

The team put on bullet-proof vests, collected the required breaking equipment and travelled to the house. When they arrived, the detectives parked their vehicle at the end of the street. They walked the final distance to the house in order to keep noise to a minimum. The team hoped this would ensure the suspect did not wake up before the front door was broken. Once they arrived at the house, the team moved into position and two detectives stood in front of the door. They were responsible for breaking the door and together held the storm ram. When the complete team was in position, the two men stepped forward and shoved the storm ram in the direction of the door. Soon they noticed that this first impact was insufficient and that the door was still locked.



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SURPRISE



After a second attempt, the door remained closed. They decided to try once more. But at that moment a loud bang was heard from inside the house followed by a second and third bang. One of the detectives who was using the storm ram fell to the ground shouting he was wounded. The team saw that there were two small holes in the door of the house and that their colleague had a bleeding wound in his shoulder. This raid had suddenly taken a completely different turn...

When the suspect was finally arrested, it was revealed that he had used a firearm to shoot through the front door of the house three times. The suspect stated he had been threatened by another drug dealer for several months. This dealer wanted to take over his "business" and had threatened to murder the suspect if he continued to sell drugs from his house. When the suspect was shocked awake by the noise of the front door being broken, he thought this other dealer had come to his house to kill him. The suspect then took a firearm and shot at his front door in order to scare him away. The suspect stated that he had never heard that it was the police standing in front of his door. No drugs were found in the house after the arrest.

A significant risk for the police officers in this scenario is that they had to position themselves in front of the access door in order to be able to breach it. This can lead to extremely dangerous situations when you do not know what is happening behind the closed door. While they concentrate on breaching the access door, it is impossible to completely focus on the potential dangers to themselves and their colleagues. This puts police officers in an extremely vulnerable position.

Countless practical examples have shown that in case of breaching a door, suspects are feeling so trapped that they decide to use a firearm to shoot at the door. Most of the time, the stress and the noise of the breaching means that these people are not aware of the fact that a police officer is on the other side of the door. In the criminal underworld, it is not unusual to occasionally be visited by competitors or enemies.

Practice has now shown that the safety of police agents is increased when they are positioned in front of the access door for as short a period as possible. It is even better if the officer is not in front of the door at all when it is breached. We must also consider the possibility of "booby traps", which are regularly placed behind doors in order to prevent undesired access.

Fortunately, a great deal of hard work has been devoted to the development of hydraulic breaching tools that can be operated remotely. These tools are developed in consultation with specialist police units. The manufacturers have listened closely to the wishes of these units and translated them in their equipment. The many years of practical experience

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gained by these police units, combined with the manufacturer's knowledge of hydraulic equipment, are used in these special tactics tools and now give police forces all over the world a new possibility to enter houses or business premises with increased safety. The hydraulic breaching tools are frequently derived from rescue tools developed for the fire and rescue market. These tools are already well-established and are an essential part of the equipment of rescuers around the world.

Another great advantage of these hydraulic breaching tools is that they can be operated in complete silence, making the surprise for the suspects

even greater. This gives the police officers more opportunity to overpower the suspects and/or secure evidence faster. The hydraulic door openers have such power that even the strongest locks and hinges can be broken.

Specialised police units in many countries make daily use of these hydraulic breaching tools and are also introduced to other special operations and military forces. These teams are becoming increasingly aware of the risks and realise that a safe distance and silent operation, when breaching doors, create a better overview and increases their capacity to respond to potentially dangerous situations.

Peter Stolwerk is a former member of a SWAT unit in the Netherlands and has been a police officer for 15 years. He is now the managing director of Providence BNIX BV, and is also a tactical consultant for various manufacturers in the police and military industry, including Holmatro Special Tactics equipment.



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Breaking and entering: hydraulic breaching systems can reduce the risk to personnel as they enter a building