

FLETC Backcountry Tactics and Training Program

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Instructor illustrating the use of camouflage and concealment for intelligence gathering.

Recent high profile events around the country have illustrated the need for tactical tracking for law enforcement officers and agents. The murder of Park Ranger Margaret Anderson in Mt. Rainier National Park, Peter Keller's murder of his family in Washington State, Aaron Bassler's murder of a public official near Fort Bragg, Calif. and the recent murder committed by Eugene Palmer in New York State all required law enforcement personnel to utilize tracking techniques to locate and apprehend the individuals involved in these crimes. As of this writing, Mr. Palmer is still at large. In addition to the instances referenced above, officers and agents trained as trackers can utilize these skills when investigating marijuana growers, conducting search and rescue, investigating game and fish violations, and investigating various crime scenes.

Most tactical teams' operations are conducted at homes when performing door entries, warrant service, or encountering barricaded suspects and hostage situations in urban environments. When thrust into a scenario involving rural environments, these teams are not as confident or proficient. With the recent trends indicated above, law enforcement tactical teams are finding themselves involved in many rural operations involving marijuana growers, illegal drug couriers and suspects fleeing into the

backcountry to avoid arrest. The need for law enforcement to address and to adapt to newly emerging criminal trends in rural areas is at an all-time high as the teams are unfamiliar with these specific and unique tactics. In order to investigate and apprehend the individuals involved in these crimes, agencies need to have trained trackers and/or tracking teams. The Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers' (FLETC) Backcountry Tactics and Tracking Training Program (BTTTP) instructs students on how to incorporate innovative and tactically safer ways to locate and apprehend suspects in this element. The tactics taught in this program easily transition into search and recovery operations. Additionally, the BTTTP offers techniques to distinguish among different types of tracks, thus enabling the safe apprehension and subsequent prosecution of suspects who have fled the scene of a crime.

The history of the BTTTP began back in 2005 when FLETC identified a need, and developed and implemented a program that provided law enforcement with the skills necessary to "track" people in a tactically safe manner and was developed to train officers and agents in the principles of tracking and tactical team movement. The BTTTP is a one-week course offering instruction in land navigation and Global Positioning

System (GPS), tracking, principles of camouflage, crime scene investigation and tactical team movement. The program utilizes scenario-based training to reinforce the skills taught in the program.

Since its inception, the BTTTP has successfully trained numerous federal, state, county and municipal law enforcement officers and agents.

The BTTTP is typically offered at one of two ranches in New Mexico, but has been taught in

Utah, West Virginia, California, Mississippi and most recently in South Carolina. The program was initially developed and offered by FLETC's Artesia, NM, site. Due to the popularity of the program, agencies located in the eastern United States began requesting the training. This required the training be conducted in terrain similar to their area of operations. Therefore, it was decided to offer the program through FLETC's Glynco, Ga., site. The program's curriculum is the same for both sites and instructors from both sites teach in the program. The applicability of the program may not be readily evident to officers and agents who do not have a background or training in this area, but the examples below illustrate the effectiveness of tracking and associated skills.

An example of the applicability of the training would be a homicide in which a suspect casually walks to a location where he commits a homicide by bludgeoning the victim to death, then turns and casually walks away from the scene, discarding a bloody shirt. What would this mean to a tracker and the forensic team? The distance between one forward footfall and the next suggests a normal stride length to and from the crime scene. To the trained tracker, this shows intent without fear of detection and predisposition in committing the crime.

Students perform track documentation to include measurements of imprint and stride or gait. This information can be used during the track to confirm sign, or the measurement of stride can be used for micro-tracking to locate sign.



Another example of the applicability of this type of training is when a crime scene is contaminated by first responders. In this case, the tracker would be capable of eliminating all of the first responders' footprints and isolating a track that's not linked to the first responders. This particular track would be the suspect's.

Utilizing the FBI footprint database and comparative analysis, a footprint found at a crime scene can be matched to a suspect based upon wear patterns of the footwear, thus placing a suspect on the scene of criminal activity. Footprints are much like latent fingerprints in that no two wear patterns are the same. Additionally, footprints can show many things to include the speed of the individual leaving the scene. These types of signs at a crime scene paint a vivid picture of what occurred.

In rural operations with marijuana growers, trackers can track an individual from a parked truck or car with fertilizer and PVC pipe in the back to the grow site. One such case was on the property of an international airport. A majority of the marijuana grow sites that are appearing are run by Mexican Nationals, who historically are armed with assault-type weapons. While attending the BTTTP, the teams are trained to move-in through this rural type environment and on how to apprehend suspects who normally flee at the first sign of law enforcement.

During the BTTTP, team movements are taught in which the tracker is protected by a team that covers flanks and rear while a controller located directly behind the tracker controls the speed and movement of the team. The rear cover or "six o'clock position" is crucial in cases where individuals are counter-tracking. The flanker's responsibility is to clear any areas of threat ahead and also to pick up any tracks that cut to the right or left of the original line of travel. A key point made to each program participant is the theory of "one plus one." That is, if the team is tracking what it believes is one suspect, and then it adds one more person (one plus one theory), what happens? Sometimes suspects walk in the same track; the experienced tracker is always looking for this indicator and normally can pick this up quite easily.

Night tracking, although risky, may come into play when looking for an abducted or lost child. Recently the sergeant of a Utah Police Department, who is also an instructor in the BTTTP, received a call regarding a missing or abducted autistic 11-year-old girl who was partially blind. The tracker was able to locate a footprint in front of the house in a puddle of water. He and a team were able to track the child for an hour and a half into a sagebrush field of about 1,000 acres in rain and blowing wind. The child was found hiding in a sage brush, cold and suffering from exposure, but she made a full recovery.

The BTTTP stresses how dangerous it is for an officer to run after a suspect who has bailed out of a car after a pursuit, unless there are several officers to cover him while he tracks the individual. Certainly, in some cases, the tracker finds the suspect while tracking alone; however, other cases have ended in injury to the officer. In a particular incident in the South, a deputy pursued a suspect into a rural area. Unbeknownst to the deputy, two people fled the vehicle. The deputy, thinking there was only



The tracker gives “ON TRACK” hand signal to let the team know he is on the track.



Plotting of team location and PLS to be relayed to the Incident Command.



Law enforcement officers using cover-to-cover movement as a response to contact.

one suspect, gave chase on foot only to find two suspects. The deputy was outnumbered and was shot in the head. The deputy, now seriously injured, could only give an approximation as to his location. The BTTTP trains the officer/agent on how to tell how many people actually fled a scene.

Officers are trained in the use of various colored lights for night tracking. Red works for some, blue for others, and subdued yellow for others. It will normally depend on what the officer’s eyes will accept. Sometimes infrared lights are used in conjunction with night vision equipment. An issue with night tracking is the light offers a beacon to the suspect with regard to

the tracker’s distance and location. Utilizing a light on the end of a stick or tool eliminates the “glow effect” around the tracker’s body which typically would make the officer/agent a target.

Participants in the program are trained in land navigation as a backup for GPS. Officers have become very dependent on electronics to aid in their jobs; however, not all electronic devices work all the time. There are variables that can affect GPS systems and the BTTTP identifies this and several other complications of using GPS. Land navigation with a compass is old but reliable. Students are trained to determine exact locations for air evacuation and for documenting exact locations of intelligence information for use in crime scene investigations or the exact location of the start point of a tracking operation.

Tracking is a mindset, a way of life. It is as perishable as any skill when not utilized on a regular basis. Students who attend the BTTTP are told on the first day of class “you will never look at the ground the same after this class.” ✨

Photos By: Keith Gartman, FLETC Protocol and Communications Office

David Brewer has worked for the FLETC for nearly 24 years in Glynco and now at the Office of Artesia Operations. He has worked in Physical Techniques Division, Enforcement Operations, and Enforcement Techniques Division in Georgia and in the General Training Branch in Artesia. He is the team leader for the Backcountry Tactics and Training Program and has been since the program’s inception. He currently is a Senior Instructor in General Training Branch in Artesia, NM. Prior to working for FLETC he was a city, county, and state law enforcement officer, primarily in criminal investigations and Special Operations Units for 21 years in Florida and Arkansas.

Wes Hoekwater began his law enforcement career with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (Law Enforcement Section) in 1996. During his tenure with the Ga. DNR, he held positions as conservation ranger, corporal, firearms instructor, and honor guard member. In 2003, Hoekwater accepted an instructor position with the FLETC. He has served as an instructor, senior instructor, and program specialist in the Driver and Marine Division. He is currently a branch chief in the Enforcement Operations Division’s Operational Skills Branch. Hoekwater is a veteran of the U.S. Army, and is a graduate of Georgia College and State University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Criminal Justice. He is currently pursuing a Masters in Post-Secondary Education at Troy University.



Team providing 360 degree security during suspect apprehension