

## **GLOUCESTER COUNTY SWAT TEAM HISTORY**

A 1975 shootout with a disturbed and barricaded man in a Mt. Holly house that resulted in the fatal shootings of three Burlington County police officers led Gloucester County law enforcement to see the need for a tactical unit equipped to confront and diffuse such threats.

The hail of bullets was the cause of the deaths of Mt. Holly Officer Donald Aleshire and Hainesport Officer William Wurst, as well as the paralysis and eventual death of Mt. Holly Officer John Holmes in 1992, who died from injuries. The incident made national headlines and shocked the New Jersey law enforcement community.

Less than a year after the Mt. Holly tragedy, Woodbury Police Chief F. Dean Kimmel organized the first Gloucester County Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) Team from the five largest police departments at the time.

The founding volunteer members were: Sgt. Thomas Birch, Washington Township; Ptl. John Merinuk, Woodbury; Ptl. John Nettleton, Deptford; Ptl. Edward White, West Deptford, and Ptl. Joseph Grasso, Glassboro.

The five officers received training at the FBI Training Academy in Quantico, VA. It was only a few weeks after their return that the team was deployed to its first incident in Clayton.

The team was expanded by one member after initial incidents demonstrated the need for more personnel and additional FBI training was given in 1977.

Early equipment provided included \$12 boots from Ernie's Shoe Post in West Deptford and a heavy military surplus bulletproof vest. Homemade periscopes to see around corners were furnished by the father-in-law of a SWAT member. An old Mantua police car became the first SWAT transport vehicle.

By May 1978, there had been 27 callouts of the Gloucester County SWAT Team. For a time in the early days, the team was renamed the Critical Incident Team (CIT). However, it was changed back to SWAT because members felt that better communicated the message that a standoff would be vain.