

# The Technology Advantage: Using Shoulder Mounted Cameras Within a Detention Facility

*By Major Timothy L. Smith, Sheriff Al Cannon Detention Center, Charleston County Sheriff's Office, North Charleston, South Carolina*



The Sheriff Al Cannon Detention Center (SACDC) is the largest detention facility in the state of South Carolina and was originally built in 1966. Since then, it has grown through three expansions. The first expansion, a five-story addition completed in 1993, raised the inmate capacity to 661. The second expansion in 2007 added two modular units and slightly raised the inmate capacity to 789. The most recent and third expansion, which was completed in 2010, raised the inmate capacity to 1,917. Today, the SACDC has three high-rise towers with 31 housing units, various support areas, and a full-time infirmary. Our mission is to serve and protect the citizens of Charleston County by maintaining secure jail operations and facilities, while preserving the rights and dignity of all who are incarcerated.

As our facility grew with these three expansions, we recognized a clear need for innovative technology and incorporated it wherever possible. Video cameras have been one example. Around 600 cameras were installed in the newest expansion, which in combination with the 130 cameras already in place allowed us to see and record virtually every movement throughout all three towers, including all of the housing units. The unfortunate downside of having this multitude of cameras was that there was no audio. Whenever an incident involving inmates or officers was reviewed, it was through recordings made by cameras mounted in the ceiling, and most of the time they were in a stationary mode. These cameras would capture the best video available, but again, no audio.

SACDC also began using video cameras with our incident response team. After completion of the first expansion, our agency received training for a formalized group of rapid response responders known as our Tactical Action Control (TAC) Team. These TAC Team officers were designated as the first responders to any given situation that involved a combative or hostile inmate. They were supervised and trained as a five-member squad, with the fifth member carrying a handheld video camera to capture the incident for after-action reviews or evidentiary purposes. When use of force was needed to control or subdue a subject, we now had a video recording of the incident to document and support the TAC Team's actions. There was audio now, but it still wasn't the best video recording because of the distance between the handheld camera and the actual hands-on encounter. However, it was adequate, and it met our needs in conjunction with the recordings we obtained from our "eyes in the sky" (the ceiling cameras).

As time pressed on and we moved into our third expansion, more technology advances were made. We also learned how to better handle combative and hostile inmates with less hands-on techniques, minimizing inmate as well as officer injuries. Our TAC Team evolved into what we now call our Special Operations Group (SOG), whose members are authorized to use less-than-lethal munitions. Now more than ever, it is important for the SOG Operators to provide thorough, comprehensive, and objective documentation of their need to introduce the use of force.

The photograph in Figure 1 shows team members during a training exercise wearing new (left) and old (right) uniforms for the jail's intervention team. A camera can be seen on the shoulder of the officer in the new uniform.

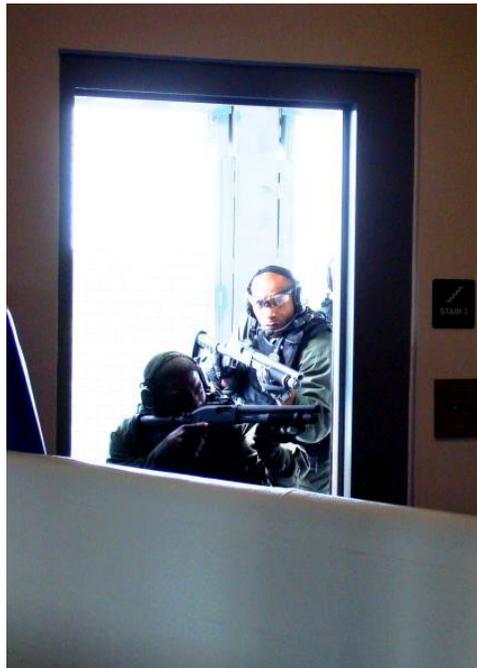
**Figure 1. The new Special Operations Group uniform (left), with shoulder camera, and the TAC Team uniform it replaced.**



## Special Operations Video Cameras in Action

SOG Operators wear shoulder-mounted body cameras to record their moves and the actions of their partners. Because the SOG Operators work in assigned partner teams, the agency gains two recordings of each incident that show different angles and views. The cameras record good-quality audio and capture rapidly unfolding events better than the handheld versions we previously used. This unique, hands-free method of camera carrying accommodates wearers of all shapes and sizes and enables each operator to more easily film the incident and not the back of someone's head.

**Figure 2. During tactical actions, shoulder-mounted cameras do not interfere with officers' physical movements.**



Beginning to record video is done very simply through the push of a button. When the incident is over, another push of the same button stops the recording. An inserted secure digital (SD) card, depending on the size used, has plenty of storage capacity to record more than what the typical incident usually requires. The video recording is downloaded directly from the camera to a computer through a USB connection, and it is saved in an MPEG file format. This format is preferable because it provides universal playback from virtually any computer and even on some DVD players without any need for conversion.

Our “Use of Force” incidents are now met with better tactics (less hands-on) and with better documentation and recordings for administrative review. The dual partner team recordings of each incident let us review it from different perspectives. The recorded video files are transferred to a compact disc for easy attachment to each “Use of Force” incident report, and the reports are forwarded up through the chain of command for review. The improved video content also helps us identify the need for any after-action training, which can be completed as necessary.

**Figure 3. Close-up view of the shoulder camera, attached to the tactical vest over the officer's body armor.**



## A Case Study

A recent incident provides an excellent example of how the body cameras have proven to be beneficial for review and Detention Center operations.

In that incident, two SOG Operators responded to a medical emergency called by a housing unit officer over the radio. The emergency was updated to an attempted suicide before they arrived, and both operators activated their shoulder-mounted body cameras. Upon entering the unit they found an inmate lying in his bunk, unresponsive. A host of nurses and officers also responded. The inmate regained consciousness while the medical staff was checking his vital signs. He was subsequently cleared to be housed in another unit, after which the decision was made to place the inmate on a suicidal precaution watch. Both operators remained with the inmate until these housing arrangements could be made.

Because the inmate was uncooperative or unwilling to stand or walk, he was placed in a wheelchair for escort to his reassigned housing unit.

When they arrived in his newly assigned unit, the inmate appeared to have a seizure. The supervisor called for the nursing staff to respond for a medical emergency. The nurses arrived, and medical attention was provided to the inmate. An order was obtained to move the inmate to the medical unit.

Upon arrival at the medical unit, the inmate appeared to have another seizure. The decision was made to send him out to the hospital. The SOG Operators remained with the inmate until they were relieved by an escort officer. The inmate was soon transported to the Medical University of South Carolina, where he passed away.

The South Carolina Law Enforcement Division (SLED) undertook an investigation of the death. The cell where the inmate originally had been housed was declared a potential crime scene. However, because the inmate was medically cleared during the initial response and relocated to another unit, that cell had been cleaned and prepared for new occupants. SLED was concerned that all relevant evidence had been inadvertently destroyed or at the very least tainted.

The SOG Operator was able to transfer the video from her body camera to a disk for SLED to review. The high-quality video and clear audio documented not only the actions of the staff but also provided a clear view of everything in the cell, including the two suicide notes that were recovered. Also documented were the decisions of the medical staff and the inmate's transfer to the medical unit, where his condition deteriorated. Of further help were the inmate's recorded admission that he took an excessive number of pills and the video documentation not only of the inmate's actions, but also of the fact that he was responsive prior to the seizures.

## **A Worthwhile Investment**

In sum, we at SACDC have found that both the simplicity and the operational capabilities of these body cameras are hugely beneficial when dealing with highly volatile situations. Furthermore, defending an organization from costly claims and lawsuits is considerably easier when you have video technology in conjunction with your documentation for evidence management. Body cameras have been well worth the investment for our facility, especially now that the square footage of all three towers covers more than half a million square feet in size. We can confidently recommend that other agencies consider equipping their incident response teams with body-mounted video cameras.

For more information, contact Major Timothy L. Smith, Sheriff Al Cannon Detention Center, Charleston County Sheriff's Office, North Charleston, South Carolina, at [tlsmith@charlestoncounty.org](mailto:tlsmith@charlestoncounty.org) or (843) 529-7311.

Document available at:

[http://community.nicic.gov/blogs/national\\_jail\\_exchange/archive/2013/08/20/the-technology-advantage-using-shoulder-mounted-cameras-within-a-detention-facility.aspx](http://community.nicic.gov/blogs/national_jail_exchange/archive/2013/08/20/the-technology-advantage-using-shoulder-mounted-cameras-within-a-detention-facility.aspx)

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