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From Boston to Austin: Lessons Learned on Homeland Threat Information Sharing

Overview

During the month of March 2018, the Austin, Texas community was terrorized by a serial bomber who killed two and injured five. Four of those injured were in Austin and the fifth was in a Fed Ex warehouse in Schertz, Texas. Those injured in Austin suffered severe to critical injuries. On March 21st, the bomber detonated a device inside his truck as an APD SWAT team moved in to arrest him. The explosion resulted in his death and injured a SWAT officer.

The investigation into the Austin serial bombings represented a remarkable cooperative effort between local, state, and federal law enforcement officials. This document will highlight the individual bombings, the resources that were dedicated to the investigation, and the major accomplishments of the partnering agencies. A more exhaustive after-action review will be conducted that will include an analysis of the investigation and lessons learned.

The Bombing Incidents

The first bombing occurred at 6:55 am on March 2nd at a single family home in Northeast Austin. A resident, Anthony House, a 39 year old African American male went outside and located a package on the front porch. Mr. House picked up the package and it exploded, causing critical injuries that he would succumb to a short time later at a local hospital. His daughter was inside the residence when the explosion occurred but was not physically injured. The response to this incident included members of the Austin Police Department (APD), the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the U.S. Postal Service (USPS). Although investigators did not have reason to believe at that time that the bombing was part of a larger scheme, it was decided at the scene to conduct a joint local/federal investigation.

The second bombing occurred on March 12th at 6:45 am at a single family home in Central-East Austin. A resident, Draylen Mason, a 17 year old African American male went outside and located a package on the front porch. Mr. Mason brought the package inside the residence and it exploded as he and his mother Shamika Wilson opened it, causing fatal injuries to Mr. Mason and serious injuries to his mother. Mr. Mason was pronounced deceased at the scene. As in the first bombing, the investigative response included the APD, the ATF, the FBI, and the USPS. Given the similarities in the modus operandi, investigators believed this incident was related to the explosion that occurred on March 2nd.

While working the scene of the second bombing, a third bombing occurred. At 11:49 am on March 12th, Esperanza Herrera, a 75 year old Hispanic female located a package in front of her residence in Southeast Austin. When she picked up the package, it exploded causing her critical injuries. We split the investigative teams since we now had two bombing scenes working simultaneously, with members of all agencies at both scenes. Based on similarities in the modus operandi and bomb components, investigators believed this incident was related to the previous two bombings.

The fourth bombing occurred on March 18th at 8:30 pm on a residential street in Southwest Austin. This bombing signaled a dramatic change in the initiation method in that it was concealed next to a sidewalk and activated by a trip-wire. While the first three explosions were the result of a package being left at a specific home, this bombing did not appear to target a specific person or address. Investigators again believed this incident was related to the previous three bombings based on similarities in components. Two Caucasian males who we have not identified publicly were seriously injured as they activated the trip-wire and were struck by shrapnel from the explosion. As in the previous incidents, the on-scene investigation was conducted cooperatively between APD, ATF, and the FBI.

On March 19th at 11:36 pm a bomb exploded in the Fed Ex ground facility in Schertz, Texas. The bomb was contained in a package that exploded as it went down the conveyor belt. An unnamed Fed Ex employee working in the facility at this time suffered non-life threatening injuries from the blast wave. Since this scene was outside the jurisdiction of APD, it was processed by the FBI and the ATF. The on-scene investigation showed similarities to the bombings that had occurred in Austin and investigators believed it was related. Further investigation revealed the package had been mailed from an Austin area Fed Ex store and was addressed to a location in Austin. The shipping route had the package process through the Schertz facility. Investigators were able to retrieve evidence believed to show the suspect dropping off two packages at the Fed Ex store in Austin.

Investigators tracked the second package to a Fed Ex ground facility located in Southeast Austin. Upon examination, it was found to contain a bomb. The Austin Police Bomb Squad, along with bomb technicians from ATF, the Houston Police Department, and the San Antonio Police Department responded to the warehouse and were able to render the device safe. The bomb located at this facility shared the same characteristics as the previous five located in Austin and Schertz.

The final explosive device involved in this bombing spree was the one the bomber detonated as Austin Police SWAT officers attempted to take him into custody in the early morning hours of March 21st. That explosion injured one officer and caused fatal wounds to the bomber. The Medical Examiner ruled his death a suicide. Upon examination, that bomb shared many similarities with the earlier bombs in this spree.

Joint Command

With APD as the lead law enforcement agency on the case, they worked together with the FBI, the ATF, the USPS, and the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) to conduct the operation from a joint command center at the Combined Transportation Emergency Communications Center (CTECC), located in Austin, Texas. The command center was established directly following the two explosions that took place on March 12th. The overall investigation was coordinated through the command center, and senior members of all agencies were present at the center throughout the investigation to ensure information sharing and timely decision making. The Unified Command Group held daily briefings at 8:00 am and 5:00 pm to brief out the events that occurred during the previous operational period.

The ATF's National Response Team operated from the center and handled the documentation and processing of leads as they were received. Additionally, a case squad room was established for the FBI and a legal affairs room was set up for the Travis County District Attorney's Office and the United States Attorney's Office. An additional room was set up for agents to write their reports as they closed out each lead.

In addition, the US Marshall's Service (USMS) assisted in the field. The APD Tactical Intelligence unit is part of the USMS Lone Star Fugitive Task Force and they assisted with investigation and surveillance.

Resources

In total, there were hundreds of federal agents on the ground in Austin during the serial bombing investigation and an additional 100 State Troopers.

APD assets and personnel utilized during the bombing investigation included:

- The Homicide Unit deployed 17 personnel to work on the serial bombing murders.
- The Special Weapons and Tactic Unit (SWAT) deployed 24 personnel to assist with tactical planning and the apprehension of the suspect.
- The Explosive Ordinance Division (EOD) deployed 12 personnel to handle suspicious package calls, assist with on-scene post blast investigation, and render the sixth bomb safe at the Fed Ex warehouse in Austin.
- The Explosive Ordinance Division (EOD) utilized a large number of assets in this process, many of which were purchased through Homeland Security grant funding. Equipment used included the APD Bomb Squad Response Trucks, Remotec HD2 Robots, Logos X-Ray Systems, Nano X-Rays Systems, XR 150 and 200 x-ray source generators, Tactical Bomb Technician gear, EOD 10 Bomb Suits, and Render Safe equipment.
- The Air Support Unit (ASU) deployed 8 personnel to provide assistance with aerial surveillance and scene processing

- The Austin Regional Intelligence Center (ARIC) and Tactical Intelligence Unit deployed 32 personnel to assist in tracking down leads and providing background information on possible suspects. The team included 22 commissioned officers and 10 analysts. The Tactical Intelligence Unit is part of the U.S. Marshall's Lonestar Fugitive Task Force, and this team ultimately located the bomber based on information provided by the FBI.
- The Organized Crime Division (OCD) deployed 13 personnel to assist with surveillance operations.

ATF assets and personnel that supported the Austin bombing investigation included:

- ATF dispatched more than 100 special agents, chemist, engineers, and intelligence analysts.
- ATF's National Response Team (NRT) responded with 33 personnel, including 7 Certified Explosive Specialists (CES), 4 Certified Fire Investigators, 3 Chemist, 1 Engineers, and 2 Intelligence Research Specialists. A second NRT team was also deployed to support investigation, which consisted of an additional 35 personnel.
- In addition to the NRT, ATF has 77 additional field Agents. This consisted of 57 Special Agents, 14 Special Agent Canine Handlers and 6 Intelligence Research Specialists on scene for a total of 145 ATF personnel on scene.

The FBI had 400 personnel and a large number of assets supporting the Austin bombing investigation. These included:

- FBI Critical Incident Response Group (CIRG) deployed approximately 108 personnel, to include:
 - (1) Behavioral Analysis Unit personnel.
 - (2) Information Technology Support (ITS) personnel.
 - (8) Crisis Management Specialists (CMS).
 - (62) Surveillance Operations Group (SOG) personnel.
 - As many as 32 Special Agent Bomb Technicians (SABT) were deployed by the FBI to augment APD and the San Antonio Police Department (SAPD).
 - (2) FBI aircraft and seven (7) crew members.
 - Approximately 16 SWAT members were deployed to support the investigation.
 - (5) Electronic Technicians (ET's) and four (4) mobile command units.
- FBI Science and Technology Branch deployed:
 - As many as 70 Evidence Response Team members, including team members from 9 other field offices.
 - (2) Evidence Control Tech personnel.
 - (12) Computer Analysis Response (CART) personnel and 3 CART mobile labs, including 2 from other field offices.
 - (3) Technical Hazards Response Unit personnel.
 - Operational Technology Division (OTD) personnel.
- A total of 9 Intelligence Support personnel were deployed from other FBI field offices.

- A total of 4 Office of Public Affairs personnel provided support with 2 from other field offices.
- Additional support was provided by FBI Headquarters Criminal Division to include 24 Digital Imaging and Video Recovery (DIVRT) members from 8 different FBI field offices.
- FBI San Antonio Field Office sent 5 members of its Executive Management team and the Houston Field Office sent its Special Agent in Charge (SAC).

In addition to the FBI and ATF assets, the USPS brought in additional personnel and equipment to assist with the high volume of suspicious package calls in the Austin region. The Texas DPS also assisted by assigning 100 State Troopers to Austin to assist with calls for service and other law enforcement duties. Additional Bomb Squad teams from the Texas DPS, the Houston Police Department, and the San Antonio Police Department also assisted APD during this investigation. The Austin Fire Department and Austin/Travis County Emergency Medical Services also played key roles at each bombing scene. The operation was also coordinated with and provided support by the Pflugerville Police Department during search warrant execution at the bomber's residence, and the Round Rock Police Department during the takedown of the bomber.

Critical Accomplishments

- The Austin Police Department Explosive Ordinance Division (EOD) responded to 569 incidents and the Explosive Detection K-9's responded to 195 incidents where patrol officers were unable to safely deem a package non-hazardous.
- APD received a total of 2,510 suspicious package calls from March 2nd to March 29th, 2018.
- The Austin Police Department Tactical Intelligence Unit (members of the US Marshall Task Force) found the bomber in Round Rock once his location had been established by the FBI. This allowed the APD SWAT to conduct a vehicle assault.
- The Austin Police Air Support Unit (ASU) deployed to 4 bomb investigation scenes and successfully coordinated with ground surveillance units when the suspect was located in Round Rock, Texas. The ASU kept the suspect within sight and provide ground surveillance teams with tactical updates on locations, traffic, pedestrians and vehicles.
- The Austin Regional Intelligence Center (ARIC), comprised of 21 public safety agencies, and the Austin Police Department Tactical Intelligence Unit brought their full complement of personnel to bear during the Austin Bombing Investigation. ARIC personnel operated from both their center and the joint command center and they assisted with working tips, gathering intelligence, coordinating efforts between agencies, assisting APD Homicide, and processing information that came in from the Fusion network.
- The Austin Police Special Weapons and Tactics Unit (SWAT) partnered with the FBI and the ATF tactical assets in the planning for several search warrants throughout this

operation. Once the bomber was located in Round Rock, Texas, and went mobile, the APD SWAT team conducted a tactical stop on the bomber's vehicle. During the stop, the bomber detonated a bomb inside his vehicle. The explosion fatally injured the bomber and caused minor injuries to a SWAT team officer.

- The Austin Police Homicide Unit worked cooperatively with the FBI and the ATF on the homicide and bombing investigations. The APD Homicide Unit was the lead investigative unit and responsible for overall crime scene management. This included coordinating resources, working two active homicide investigations from the joint command center, crime scene response, hospital response, evidence recovery at 11 separate crime scenes, and interviews of numerous witnesses and victims.
- The Austin Police Homicide unit worked with the ATF, the Travis County District Attorney's Office, and the Assistant US Attorney's Office in securing arrest and search warrants for the bomber and his residence.
- FBI Evidence Response Teams participated in the collection of evidence at 11 crime scenes.
- FBI SWAT assisted APD in executing a warrant at the bomber's residence in Pflugerville, Texas. A significant amount of explosive materials and other bomb components were located in the residence.
- FBI's investigative efforts resulted in the location of the bomber in his vehicle, which enabled APD's Tactical Intelligence unit to respond to the scene and contain him. This kept him from entering the highway and injuring others.
- FBI's 9 surveillance teams conducted 24/7 surveillance of several suspects, including the bomber, during the investigation.
- ATF and FBI collected over 564 pieces of evidence at the bombing scenes. The evidence was sent to the ATF National Laboratory in Ammendale, Maryland for forensic analysis.
- ATF completed over 429 reports of investigations since the first incident on March 2, 2018.
- Over 400 leads were vetted/investigated. Additional leads will continue to be logged, tracked, and investigated by APD, the ATF, and the FBI.
- ATF victim-witness coordinators assisted APD Victim Services counselors and remained in contact with victims and their families throughout the investigation.
- U.S. Attorney's Office remains in contact with the Travis County District Attorney's Office and offered to make all federal resources available as needed.
- ATF agents worked with the Travis County District Attorney's Office, and the Assistant US Attorney's Office in securing the search and arrest warrant affidavits for the arrest of the bomber and the search of his residence.

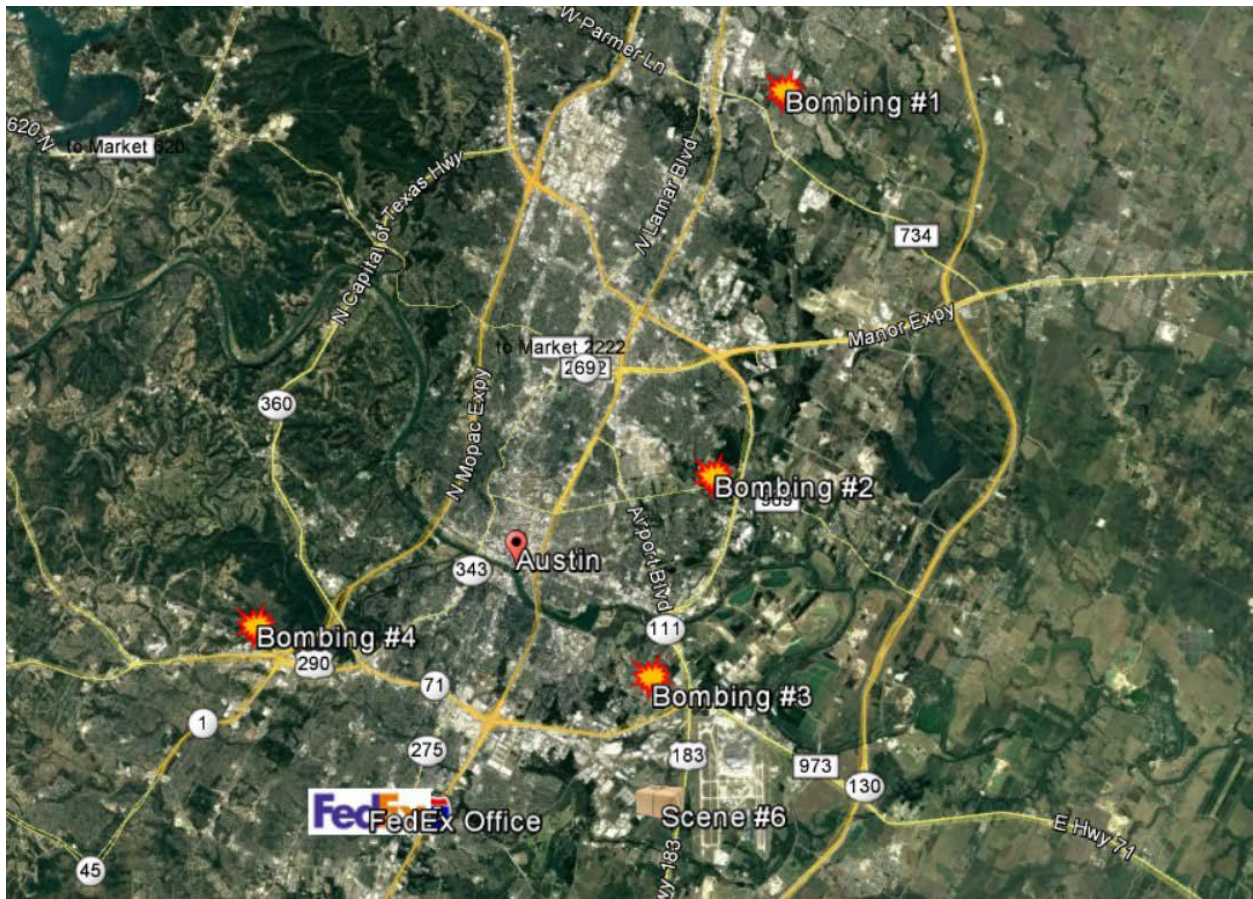
Conclusion

The serial bombing spree that occurred in Austin, Texas would have overwhelmed the resources of not only APD, but most major city police departments across the country. The tremendous assistance from the FBI, the ATF, the USPS, the USMS, the Texas DPS, and other

local agencies was integral in bringing this attack on Austin to quick resolve. The cooperation among all agencies is also of note as everyone worked together constructively and collaboratively, avoiding any “turf” issues that could have slowed the operation and left the Austin community at risk for a longer period of time.

Austin will continue to be the vibrant and inviting city we were before these attacks, but we are forever changed. We will not forget the lives of Anthony House or Draylen Mason, senselessly taken by the serial bomber. We will also not forget the importance of remaining vigilant and looking out for one another’s safety and wellbeing.

Austin Bombing Locations



Schertz Bobming Location

