

*Keith Hoffer*

# A Shot in the Dark

*By Philip Comey*

**I**t is pouring rain. In a prison, a male inmate who has been sentenced to 699 years for being a convicted serial rapist has barracked an office door and covered up all windows. In the office with the inmate waits a terrified counselor working in the prison that day, a woman.

These tense circumstances glared Lt. Keith Hoffer of the Delaware Department of Corrections, Court and Transportation, in the face on July 12, 2004. The searing situation lasted more than six hours and left one person sexually assaulted, one person dead and one person with an incredible story. Hoffer, who has worked with the DOC for 25 years, was unit manager of the Correctional Emergency Response Team and was paged at 10:30 a.m. regarding the emergency at the Delaware Correctional Center. "You are pretty much at your peak as far as adrenaline goes, when you get a call like that," Hoffer said.

A female counselor was conducting an inmate group counseling session that morning in the facility. After the group dispersed, the convicted rapist slipped away from the group and hid in a bathroom. While walking past the bathroom, the counselor caught a glimpse of a yellow jumpsuit, the clothing inmates wear. The inmate, standing at a daunting 6 feet 3 inches tall and weighing 260 pounds, grabbed the counselor while wielding a homemade knife more than 6 inches long and threatened to kill her. Screams alerted authorities and after a brief stand-off in the bathroom, the inmate dragged the counselor into a nearby office. Wedging furniture in between the door and the wall, he dissolved any hopes that authorities could get into the room through conventional means.

Coincidentally, Hoffer was at a meeting on the grounds of the Delaware Correctional Center when he got the emergency page. The warden of the facility placed Hoffer in charge of a six-person response team and told him to use lethal force if necessary. The office door where the crisis was transpiring was rendered impenetrable and the windows were too small; they had to find another way in.

Hoffer's team decided to explore options in the office adjacent to the deadly situation. They quietly crept into an office sharing a wall with the target office and covered all the windows to keep the room dark. They removed tiles from the office ceiling, hoping they could view the hostage room and perhaps access it.

Hoffer and his team quietly moved furniture and climbed on top to remove some tiles from the ceiling. "It took us half an hour to move these things [furniture] knowing that he was right on the other side of the wall," Hoffer said. "I could hear him talking, so any sounds that we made I knew that he would hear."

Fortune favored the team members as they realized the inmate had removed a few ceiling tiles as well, allowing Hoffer to stand up on a file cabinet and peak over the wall into the inmate's barricaded office.

"The first time I popped up to look, he was actually walking directly toward me, and I popped back down cause I was sure he was looking right at me." Hoffer said.

The team stayed as quiet as possible, only peeking into the room from over the wall every few minutes to avoid alerting the inmate to their presence, which could have exacerbated the inmate's already violent and unpredictable tendencies.

Despite what seemed like positive negotiations between the inmate and officials outside the door, the situation took a terrifying nose dive; the inmate fell silent. After five minutes, Hoffer peeked over the wall to see what was happening. To his horror, Hoffer witnessed the end of a sexual assault on the counselor. Moments later, an unidentified noise ignited the explosive situation.

The enraged inmate climbed on top of his barricade, and when Hoffer attempted to get another look into the room, he saw the inmate swiping the homemade knife at him. "That was more terrifying than any horror movie I have ever seen, coming face to face with him like that," Hoffer said.

The  
*Best*  
in the *Business*



While trying to avoid being stabbed, Hoffer kept peeking over the wall in an attempt to ensure the hostage was not being harmed. The inmate, finding his efforts fruitless, ceased attacking Hoffer and turned his attention toward killing the hostage.

Hoffer had to act fast. While dangling on the wall from the waist up, a team member held Hoffer's legs steady as he took aim and fired. The inmate's white T-shirt provided a bright enough target in the darkened room for Hoffer, a certified firearms instructor, and he effectively took the inmate down with two shots from his pistol. With his last dying steps, the inmate fell forward on top of the hostage, still holding the knife. Due to Hoffer's heroics, she survived. When questioned about his decision, Hoffer does not hesitate to reaffirm it.

"I did what was absolutely necessary," Hoffer said. "I did everything by the book; our side of the operation was textbook. There was no doubt in my mind he was on his way to kill her."

Hoffer, who received the medal of valor from the Delaware DOC, explains that the hardest part was worrying about how his son would react. "I guess my biggest fear was the look in his eyes when he first saw me, and afterwards, how was he going to look at his dad?" Hoffer said. "But he came through really well and told me he was proud of me. And that's what I needed to hear."

---

*Philip Comey is assistant editor of Corrections Today.*