

California Freeway Battleground. Sniper on Police Helicopter Opens Fire on Vehicle

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Snipers shooting enemy combatants from a helicopter is a normal occurrence for soldiers engaged in a combat zone, but this is exactly what occurred on September 18, 2015 in San Bernardino County in California. Police were pursuing a suspect on the 215 freeway who was traveling against traffic.

That is when a sniper aboard a police helicopter opened fire on the vehicle which resulted in the suspect's vehicle colliding head first onto an oncoming vehicle. [1] San Bernardino County Sheriff Department's spokeswoman stated that the suspect was "threatening the public" which served as justification for the shooting. However, there has not been a "published legal decision testing officers' ability to use that specific tactic" according to law enforcement legal counselor, Deputy Ed Obayashi. [2]

The San Bernardino Sheriff Department has not yet stated how many shots were fired from the helicopter. The lack of transparency from this event is appalling. Although it has been rare for police to shoot from a helicopter, this situation must be viewed in the context of the United States' increasingly militarized police force. With recent revelations about police drone surveillance in conjunction with high profile cases of police shootings of unarmed black people and its subsequent militarized response (e.g. Ferguson), the public should be skeptical of such police activities.

If similar events occur, there will be a debate around such actions, especially when standard police tactics generate much controversy. Surely a debate would include its legality, safety, and accuracy. The fact that President Obama has authorized the drone killings of U.S. citizens, it is possible that these war zone techniques will be used here domestically. [3]

It is likely that helicopter assisted sniper shootings would be used during civil unrest situations. However, officer safety and accuracy would be a concern to police departments. Therefore, the use of drones to subdue suspects instead of helicopter snipers seems naturally plausible. A soft-launch of such police tactics would utilize drones that fire non-lethal projectiles, such as the Skunk Riot Control Copter, in order to justify its legality. [4] Consequently, it is imperative that the public reject the use of helicopter assisted shootings from becoming standard procedure because of its potential use for abuse and militarized state-oppression of protest movements.

Notes

[1] Melissa Pamer, Chip Yost, and Rick Chambers, "Gunshots Fired From Sheriff's Helicopter Kills Pursuit Suspect; NB 215 Fwy Shut" September 18, 2015 <http://ktla.com/2015/09/18/pursuit-crash-and-fatal-shooting-leads-to-closure-on-northbound-215-in-san-bernardino/>

[2] Richard Winton and Garrett Therolf, "Police shooting from helicopters-rare but not unheard of" September 19, 2015 <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-police-shooting-from-helicopters-rare-but-not-unheardof-20150919-story.html>

[3] Sue Owen, "Four U.S. citizens killed in Obama drone strikes, but 3 were not intended targets" March 19, 2014 <http://www.politifact.com/texas/statements/2014/mar/19/-kesha-rogers/four-us-citizens-killed-obama-drone-strikes-3-were/>

[4] Sarah Gray, "Terrifying riot drone is equipped to shoot paint balls, plastic bullets and pepper spray" June 19, 2014 http://www.salon.com/2014/06/19/terrifying_riot_drone_-_equipped_to_shoot_paint_balls_plastic_bullets_and_pepper_spray/

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