The OLETC Mock Prison Riot Features Technological Improvements

By Sharon Goudy

The crowd that was gathering in the South Yard of the former West Virginia Penitentiary in Moundsville, W.Va., late in the afternoon on May 9, 2006, knew something big was about to happen. The approximately 200 people — a mix of correctional and law enforcement officers, media representatives and other government officials — had been hearing snippets of radio chatter here and there around the grounds all afternoon. It was only after the first Army National Guard helicopter swooped in that they realized the magnitude of the scenario unfolding before them: nearly 100 correctional and law enforcement officials from multijurisdictional agencies were responding to a hostage situation that involved 60 inmates and encompassed most of the compound. And so began the largest, most collaborative Office of Law Enforcement Technology Commercialization (OLETC) Mock Prison Riot scenario in the event's 10-year history, which also served as a major and concerted effort to revamp and improve opportunities for technology showcasing and training for corrections and law enforcement officials everywhere.

Photos by Leah Duck

Correctional officers work to quell a massive yard disturbance during the 2006 OLETC Mock Prison Riot.

OLETC, located in Wheeling, W.Va., was established in 1995 by the National Institute of Justice to develop and deploy an active, broad-based national program to assist in the commercialization of innovative technology for use by the law enforcement and correctional communities. NIJ is the research and development arm of the U.S. Department of Justice and is dedicated to objectively researching issues and providing knowledge and tools to meet the challenges faced by law enforcement, particularly at the state and local levels. The Mock Prison Riot is a cornerstone of the OLETC program.

Generally, the Mock Prison Riot is a week-long event, which involves two days of skills competition and an opening ceremony, followed by three more days of showcasing technologies, demonstrations and scenarios where teams of law enforcement and correctional officers can try out the newest tools under the most realistic conditions possible, with the former penitentiary as the proving ground. The event is held in conjunction with NIJ and the National Corrections and Law Enforcement Training and Technology Center (NCLETTC). Both OLETC and NCLETTC are initiatives of the West Virginia High Technology Consortium Foundation whose mission is to provide innovative, technology-based programs, products and services to the global marketplace.

The Mock Prison Riot was first performed in May 1997, when it lasted a single day. Four law enforcement and correctional technologies were showcased, and 70 people attended. In comparison, the 2006 Mock Prison Riot broke all the previous statistical records: 1,400 people attended, 90 technologies were showcased, 53 scenarios were executed and 50 workshops were conducted — numbers that are double and even triple those recorded for 2005. Teams from all over the United States and the world have participated in the mock riot since its inception 10 years ago.

OLETC staff hope that major changes — some of which they first implemented for the 2006 riot, and some of which are still to come — greatly benefit the technologists and law enforcement and corrections officials for whom this event is designed.

"When it was time to start planning for the 2006 Mock Prison Riot, we knew we wanted to do something special because this year was our 10th anniversary," said Steve Morrison, interim director of OLETC. "So the staff started brainstorming and this resulted in numerous ideas coming to light, not only for a special activity to mark the anniversary, but ideas which would improve the riot as a whole."

Changes for 2006

During the past year, the staff has looked at every aspect of the mock riot, down to the very last details, to determine what could be done to make the event more beneficial for technologists and participants. "We looked at everything from how we conduct registration, scenarios and safety to how many tables and chairs do we have and where are the best possible areas to place them," Morrison said. "We have been that comprehensive and thorough in reviewing our processes."

The first major areas to be overhauled were registration and scheduling. OLETC now has a comprehensive registration database for the Mock Prison Riot and is exploring technology options to implement on-site, self-registration for the 2007 event. The second major change involved how scenarios are scheduled. "In the past, we would have scenarios scheduled every afternoon — four of them every hour, on the hour in various locations around the prison compound," Morrison said. "If you were an observer or a technologist who wanted his or her technology placed in a scenario, that schedule limited your options." Now, scenario times are staggered, starting on the hour as well as the half hour, and running morning and afternoon throughout the compound. "We tripled the number of scenarios we offer and adjusted the start times so that more people could attend more scenarios. It went over very well for all involved — the participating teams, the observers and the technologists. They were all much happier," Morrison said. "We also have started utilizing areas of the prison that we hadn't before for scenarios and technology demonstrations. The teams and technologists love it."

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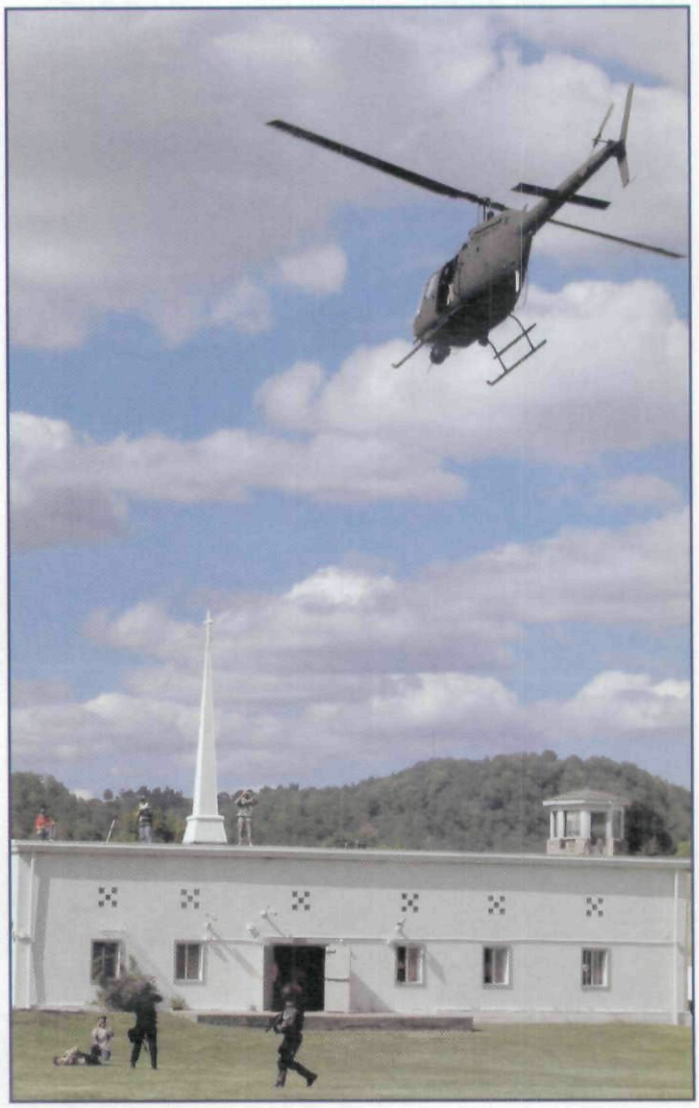

The Army National Guard participates in a scenario near the chapel in the south yard of the former West Virginia Penitentiary in Moundsville as part of the 2006 OLETC Mock Prison Riot.

The OLETC Mock Prison Riot

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Seating areas were added to the technology showcase to promote more interaction between technologists and end-users. Electronic evaluation stations were added in an effort to garner immediate feedback both on the showcased technologies and the mock riot overall. Technology demonstrations were more tailored to actual conditions under which they might be deployed, and new and improved safety procedures were implemented for the scenarios. What resulted is shown by the statistics: the highest number ever of participants, scenarios, workshops and, most important, showcased technologies, which is OLTEC's primary mission. "It was our most successful year," Morrison said. "The staffs of OLETC and NCLETTC worked very hard to implement these initial changes and it really paid off for all those who attended and participated."

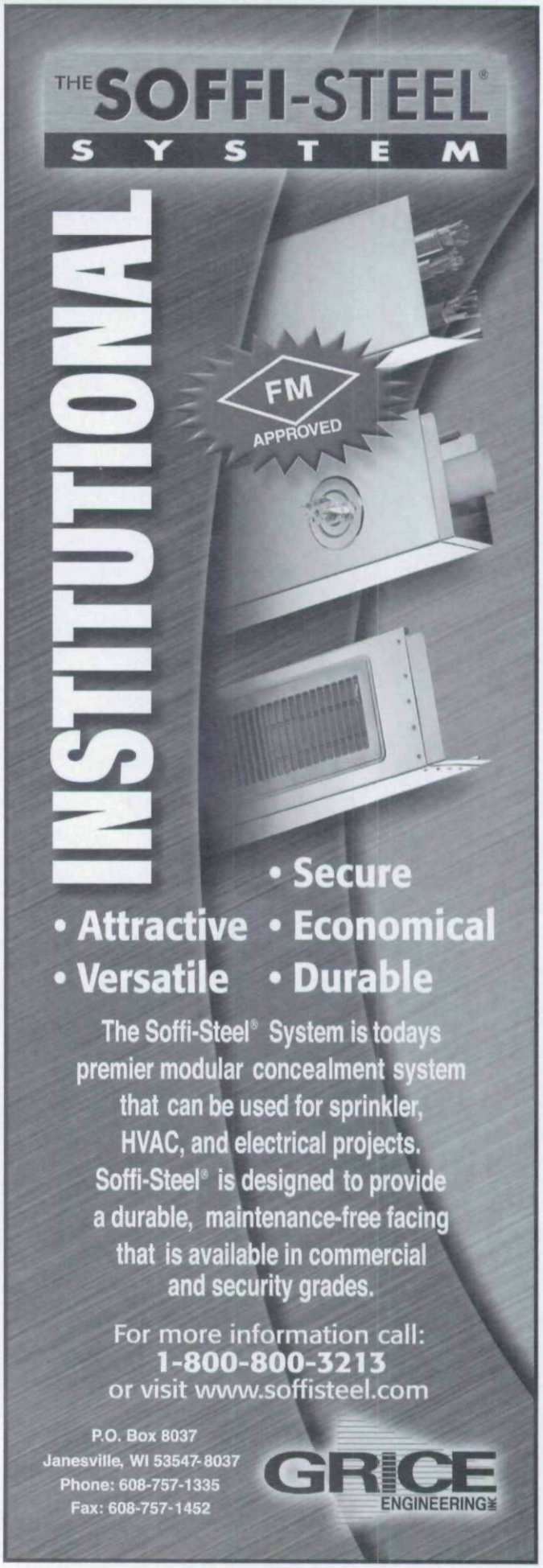
Continual Improvement

Even the massive scenario enacted in the former West Virginia penitentiary yard during the 2006 mock riot, developed as the special event to mark the 10th anniversary, has started the staff thinking that maybe there should be something unique in the works every year. Dubbed the "Secret Scenario," it enlisted teams from the West Virginia Division of Corrections, the Ohio Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, the Weirton (W.Va.) Police Department, the Army National Guard, and the Gwinnett County (Ga.) Sheriff's Office. "The Secret Scenario really showed how multiple teams can use technology to work together to resolve any situation," Morrison said. "Our staff members really enjoyed the challenge of working out the logistics of the Secret Scenario. The teams that participated were consummate professionals. Now we are asking ourselves, 'What can we do next?'"

Already on the agenda for 2007 are processes to refine the registration and scheduling improvements implemented in 2006. A revamped registration page for the OLETC Web site is in the works, and technologists will soon have the option of registering early and selecting their booth location from an electronic map of the showcase. Also on tap are workshops geared more toward subject matter suggested by participants.

Morrison says that the suggestions provided by participants are valuable to the riot's future improvements and that staff have analyzed feedback from the 2006 riot. "All of these changes and improvements are designed with one goal in mind — ensuring that the technologists and participants get the most that they possibly can from the Mock Prison Riot experience," Morrison said. "Fortunately, we have very professional staff members who are willing to think outside the box, work together and take on the challenge of initiating change and improvements."

Sharon Goudy is the projects coordinator for the Office of Law Enforcement Technology Commercialization.



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