



# Note du CREOGN

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## An American perspective on Amok attacks

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On March 16<sup>th</sup> 2017, at 12:50, Killian B. entered the Alexis de Tocqueville High School in Grasse (French Riviera), carrying several weapons. The shooting spree that ensued, lasted ten minutes, and left five victims injured, before the French National Police was able to arrest the attacker<sup>1</sup>. In France, this type of attack is a new challenge for law-enforcement forces, especially for intervention squads. These weaponized attacks without any political motive - known in France as “amok attacks”<sup>2</sup> - are often mistaken for terrorist attacks, notwithstanding their differences. So, let us ask ourselves : what differentiates such an attack from a terrorist one ?

Defined as “an episode of sudden mass assault”<sup>3</sup> the Malaysian word “amok” was popularized in a 1922 novel by Stefan Zweig<sup>4</sup>. Modern amok attacks can be described as a sudden assault, in a densely populated area or premise, by a lone attacker<sup>5</sup>, using one or several firearms<sup>6</sup>. The United States are used to these attacks, which have been carefully described and studied by local academics and practitioners.

Lessons learned from the USA deserve to be known by the French security forces. Amok attackers, unlike lone-wolf terrorists, do not act according to political or religious agendas, but due to a personal motive<sup>7</sup>.

The differences between both types of attack include their respective targets, methods and purpose. It is therefore important first to assess the threat in France (I), then to study the operational challenge it raises for both the French law-enforcement agencies and the French people (II).

### **I- A serious threat**

Amok attacks are a relatively new phenomenon in France, but they are well documented in the United States, with the first reports of such attacks going back to 1948<sup>8-9</sup>. Due to the extent of this threat, many studies have been produced. Paying attention to these studies (A) may help us understand the various components of the amok phenomenon so that we can prevent future amok attacks (B).

1- “Ce que l'on sait de la fusillade dans un lycée de Grasse”, *Le Monde* [online], 16 mars 2017, last checked 08/072017.

URL : [http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2017/03/16/le-gouvernement-declenche-l-alerte-attentat-a-grasse-a-la-suite-d-une-fusillade-dans-un-lycee\\_5095555\\_3224.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2017/03/16/le-gouvernement-declenche-l-alerte-attentat-a-grasse-a-la-suite-d-une-fusillade-dans-un-lycee_5095555_3224.html)

2 - Amok attack can also be described as active shooter scenarios or mass shooting. However French law enforcement official term is amok attacks.

3 - Merriam Webster dictionary [online], last checked 16/01/2017. URL : <https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/amok>

4 - Stefan Zweig, *Amok*, 1922.

5 - There are some exceptions, such as the Columbine High School, where two shooters were present.

6 - There is a few amok attacks where knives were used, but it is quite uncommon and will not be discussed in this article.

7- In their article on lone wolf terrorism, Stewart and Burton make a difference between the “lone wolf”, terrorist who choose to act alone, and the “lone nuts”, troubled individual who acting by himself. It is in that second category that amok attackers can be found. Source : Fred Burton et Scott Stewart, *The Lone Wolf Disconnects* [online], 01/30/2008, last checked 08/07/2017. URL : <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/lone-wolf-disconnect>

8 - In Los Angeles, where William Ray Bonner shot dead 6 people.

9 - Some historians traced amok attacks back to 1863, but the facts they described are very different from the current form of the phenomenon.

## A) A well documented phenomenon

If the Grasse attack is a rare occurrence in France, similar attacks are extremely common in the United States<sup>10</sup> : in 2016 alone, as 477 amok attacks were reported in the United States, resulting in 600 deaths<sup>11</sup>. In France, only two cases in recent memory preceded the Grasse Highschool attack: first the “Luxiol Massacre” in 1989, when Christian Dornier, a farmer in Eastern France, balled fourteen people with a rifle<sup>12</sup> ; then, in 1995, when Eric Borel, aged sixteen, killed fifteen people before committing suicide.

Even though modern amok attacks can be described as “a single armed gunman attacking a group of people”, this original pattern has evolved a lot. Each variation in the modus operandi, the circumstances, or the environment requires the police to develop, in each case, different operational and legal responses.

The preparation of the attack is one of the first elements which need to be taken into consideration. It seems, for instance, that Christian Dornier acted suddenly, without any warning signs of his murderous intentions ; whereas Killian B. carefully planned his attack, gathered ammunition and posted a threatening video online. In addition, certain places appear to be more frequently targeted by amok attackers, offices and schools accounting for seventy percent of the cases in the US<sup>13</sup>.

Even if many attacks remain inexplicable -especially when the attacker gets killed-, the desire to take revenge is present, often caused by a dismissal or bullying. These psychological factors, as well as an excessive media coverage, can likely trigger potentially dangerous individuals to perpetrate future attacks. Whatever the case is, examining all these elements one-by-one, and applying a decision making process (DMP) to them may offer an efficient tool to prevent such dramatic events.

## B) Who is the adversary ?

Amok-attackers can be analyzed thanks to the LNVAWI-method: an acronym for Location-Nature-Volume-Attitude-Weaponry and Ideology. In the case of an amok attack, elements such as the location (ie. the most common targets), the weaponry and the ideology could well be studied before the attack occurs, in order to neutralize, or at least to minimize its consequences.

To begin with, precisely identifying the shooter’s location prior to the attack is hard, whereas identifying potential targets -such as schools, offices or big crowds<sup>14</sup> is a much easier option for law-enforcement forces. Drafting a list of these vulnerable institutions -as provided, in France, by the school safety plans (*Plans Particuliers de Mise en Surêté (intrusion)*<sup>15</sup>) – along with getting in contact with, informing and advising the people working there, can be an efficient first step. The possibility of a more exhaustive training will be discussed more in detail below.

Assuming that every “soft target” cannot realistically be protected, these measures would allow a faster response to any attack. Weaponry is a decisive factor in the “success” or the “failure” of any attack. In the United States, the Armalite AR-15, a semi automatic assault rifle, has often been used in mass shootings<sup>16</sup>. In contrast, French amok attackers are usually carrying less powerful weapons. In the Grasse shooting, the attacker, who had more firepower than his predecessors, was only carrying a hunting rifle, an alarm pistol, and a 22-LR revolver<sup>17</sup>.

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10 - To bring some clarity to this article, the amok attack discussed here will only include the one where the attacker used one or more firearms. This editorial choice is based on two factors: it is the most common form of amok attack and it is the most difficult to handle for law enforcement.

11 - US Mass Shooting Data, 2016, *Mass Shooting Tracker*, [online] last checked 08/27/2017. URL : <https://www.massshootingtracker.org/data/2016>

12 - “La Tuerie de Luxiol”, *RTL* [online], 03/10/2015, last checked 08/29/2017. URL : <http://www.rtl.fr/actu/societe-faits-divers/la-tueriede-luxiol-7776953763>

13 - Statistic for the United States 2000-2013 [online], *CNN*, last checked 08/29/2017. URL :

<http://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/13/health/mass-shootings-in-america-in-charts-and-graphs-trnd/index.html>

14 - see footnote 13.

15 - The Plan Particulier de Mise en Sùreté (Safety Special Planning) will be discussed later in this article

16- Alan Feuer, AR-15 Rifle are Beloved, Reviled and a Common Element in Mass Shooting, *The New York Times* [online], juin 2016, last checked 12/07/2017. URL : <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/14/nyregion/ar-15-rifles-are-beloved-reviled-and-a-common-element-in-mass-shootings.html>

17- T. Boutry, J.P. Décugis E. Pelletier, Fusillade de Grasse : Killian voulait « se venger », *Le Parisien* [online], 03/2017, last checked 12/09/2017.

URL : <http://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/fusillade-de-grasse-killian-voulait-se-venger-18-03-2017-6772854.php>

However the effect of the shooter's firearms was limited, especially against the weapons and ballistic protection used by the local intervention squad. It seems essential, for first responders and intervention squad members alike, to be aware of statistical studies on the most common firearms in France, and how they operate. Finally, examining the adversary's ideology is crucial. As aforementioned, Killian B. had posted a threatening message on the Internet, making his intentions public. Online monitoring - like the one set up by the French gendarmerie open source intelligence (OSINT) unit - would help officials to prevent some attacks. Knowing and paying attention to the studies made about the amok-phenomenon in the United States can only be beneficial. Indeed, Internet is used as a tool to glorify mass shootings footages, especially concerning attacks against schools. The Grasse shooter had referenced Columbine online before, and one of his friends had posted a picture of the Chardon High School attacker <sup>18-19</sup> shortly before the Grasse shooting happened. No doubt that identifying and analyzing these clues could have helped prevent the attack.

## **II - A challenge for law enforcement agencies and the public**

Responding to amok attacks requires a specific training for law-enforcement officers (A), as well as for the public (B).

### **A) Law Enforcement Response**

Amok attacks are a social phenomenon, which therefore evolves in accordance with the society they are part of. Hence, it is crucial that law enforcement agencies monitor its evolution, and continue to adapt their response to these evolving threats. Without this continuous effort, the consequences can be dire for the public.

On April 20<sup>th</sup> 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered Columbine High School in Columbine, Colorado, and opened fire on their classmates. As established by the standard procedure at that time, the first law-enforcement responders surrounded the school and waited for the SWAT team to arrive. The shooting lasted close to fifty minutes and ended with the attackers killing themselves. The late arrival of the SWAT team, coupled with a tactical doctrine refraining first responders from engaging the attackers, resulted in the high number of deaths<sup>20</sup>.

The conclusions the American police drew are clear. To begin, response time is the crucial factor, and first responders must engage the shooter as soon as they arrive on scene. Then, emergency call centers play a pivotal role. Indeed, in Columbine, a teacher, who took shelter in the library -where most of the fatalities occurred- managed to call the emergency services. However, the conversation rapidly turned useless, as the panicked caller repeated continuously the same sentences whereas the operator always asked the same questions without getting the needed answers. This perfectly illustrates how, if not properly managed, a caller in a high stress situation may become unable to provide the necessary information and get trapped in a "communication loop". This bothersome situation is of course paralyzing and time consuming for the rescuers and dangerous for the victims. The use of a decision-tree questionnaire, drafted for the different planned scenarios, could be a solution. These two factors - the importance of response time, and the need to collect accurate information - may seem obvious today, but they were innovations in the US police's tactical doctrine at the time of the Columbine attack. Nearly twenty years later, law-enforcement response to an amok attack still needs to evolve to confront an ever changing threat. The recent Las Vegas shooting, where the shooter was on the thirty second floor of a building, making him unreachable for the first officers on the scene, is a good example of the new tactical challenges the police forces face.

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18 - Fusillade de Grasse, l'inquiétant profil de Killian B., le suspect interpellé, *Le Parisien* [online], 03/2017, last checked 12/09/2017. URL : <http://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/fusillade-a-grasse-l-inquietant-profil-de-killian-b-le-suspect-interpelle-16-03-2017-6767727.php>

19 - The Chardon High School shooting resulted in the death of three people in february 2012 in Ohio.

20 - Columbine High School Shootings, *History*, last checked 10/18/2017. URL : <https://www.history.com/topics/columbine-high-school-shootings>

## **B) Training the public ?**

Article L721-1 of the French Internal Security Code (CSI)<sup>21</sup> states that “everyone contributes with their conduct to public safety”. It is therefore essential to involve people in preventing and responding to amok attacks, especially in the places which are particularly likely to be targeted.

The French Ministry of National Education has launched a campaign for schools to develop their own counter intrusion safety plan - in French, *plan particulier de mise en sûreté (intrusion)*, or *PPMS(i)* -, stating that each of them must develop a response capability to an armed intrusion into their facilities, as a first step to raise awareness about the threat, but it is a limited effort. Indeed, the planning of the *PPMS(i)*, including option such as confinement and evacuation, is the responsibility of the school principal, with the Gendarmerie or the National Police only acting as consultants, and even then only upon request.

With little to no security training, it is difficult for school principals to establish an adequate *PPMS(i)*. However civilian training programs exist and could be provided. In the United States, one of the first such program to be used was the “Run Hide Fight” program. In the aftermath of the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, where the employment of this method was criticized for leading to multiple deaths<sup>22</sup>, a new model was introduced under the acronym *ALICE (Alert-Lockdown-Inform-Counter-Evacuate)*. This non linear method summarizes every possible attitude during an amok attack. In France, as stated by article L721-1<sup>23</sup> of the CSI, any person “must alert the emergency services” (Alert and Inform), and then take “the first necessary steps” (Lockdown, Counter and Evacuate), as listed in the *ALICE* system. The *ALICE* system, being an easy-to-remember summary of every useful action normal people can take during an amok attack, could be adapted into a French version, and implemented during training.

Such civilian training could also allow every stakeholder in the process to learn about the threat, enabling the detection of potential attacks. In addition, it is also crucial to inform the media on how to handle such attacks, particularly by insisting that they must not name the shooters, in order to avoid them knowing a posthumous and groundless fame on the Internet that could motivate potential attackers to act.

If amok attacks are a new concern for the French law enforcement community, the threat has already been examined by academics and police practitioners for decades. Despite their nebulous characteristics, such attacks can be described and countered using a decision making process. The constant evolution and the various forms of this threat require an ever renewed training for French law enforcement, and for the civilian population, the first victim of amok attacks.

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21 - « Toute personne concourt par son comportement à la sécurité civile. En fonction des situations auxquelles elle est confrontée et dans la mesure de ses possibilités, elle veille à prévenir les services de secours et à prendre les premières dispositions nécessaires », article L721-1 du Code de la Sécurité Intérieure.

22 - On February 16th 2007, Seung Hui Cho opened fire in Norris Hall on Virginia Tech campus. The rooms where the students were hiding were not locked, which allow him to enter them and to kill numerous students. In two of the Norris Hall rooms, students and professors locked the doors and denied Cho access by putting furnitures behind the it, saving several of the potential victims.

23 - See footnote 22.