

HOSTAGE

in the Jail

By Deputy Chris Miller (Retired)
Photos by Los Angeles County Sheriff's Museum

Lock Down! Lock Down!

The sudden flashing of red lights and strident dinging of bells warned that the jail was to be completely locked down. It was Saturday, June 29, 1996 and Deputy Ben Estrada was working the visiting area of East Max Facility at Pitchess Detention Center, impatiently counting down the days until his transfer to patrol. "Not another drill!" was his disgruntled thought as the announcement "Lock down! Lock down!" was blared over the PA system.

Deputy Dwendle Smith went through the Main Control Gate and then, much to Estrada's surprise, took off running really hard toward the kitchen. Smith was the kind of guy who never got excited or upset about anything, so for him to be running, especially running that hard, something must be up! Estrada immediately took off after Smith.

Hostage Taker

The 1,700 prisoners confined to East Max



Deputy Ben Estrada

Facility were supervised by just 30 deputies. In the kitchen, the 40 trustees who prepared the food were overseen by two cooks, a custody assistant and the kitchen deputy. Alesandro Rojo had been convicted of burglary and was assigned to the jail kitchen as a sandwich maker while awaiting sentencing. Rojo was concerned that he would be sent to prison for two years and that his wife would leave him. During the past two days, other inmates had



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Deputy Jonathan Melville

seen Rojo staring at a photo of his wife and mumbling that he had to get out of the jail.

Hostage Situation

It was common practice for trustees who worked in the kitchen to check out large knives to cut up food while they were preparing meals. A trustee who was standing next to the cook was wearing a belt that had a white plastic holster with a 12-inch boning knife inserted into

it. All at once, trustee Rojo grabbed the boning knife and held it to the throat of the civilian cook while he dragged her to the back of the kitchen. Trustee Carbajal tried to help the cook by poking Rojo with a broom handle, hoping he'd drop the knife.

Coordinating a Critical Incident

Deputy Jonathan Melville grabbed the broom handle from Carbajal and told him to leave. Then Melville, who had been a reserve deputy, reverted back to his patrol training and how he'd handled a domestic violence call where the wife was held hostage. Keying the radio mic, he said, "10-33, give me the patch," then gave details of the hostage situation and instructed the Main Control deputy to lock down the jail. He requested 902R, a field sergeant and, lastly, an AR-15.

Sgt. Greg Simon was sitting in the Watch Commander's office with Lt. Fred Cook when they heard Deputy Melville's radio broadcast. Sgt. Simon said, "Melville sounds like he knows what he's doing. I'll make sure the jail is locked down and we'll deploy the AR-15."

Melville recognized that this inmate was no

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amateur and was well versed with a knife. He wasn't holding it by the handle like an inexperienced person would do. Instead, he was holding the hostage's forehead back with his weak hand and with his strong hand, holding the knife by the blade with two fingers on one side. Melville found out later that Rojo had been trained as a member of the Salvadoran Army.

What Deputies Dwendle Smith and Ben Estrada found when they arrived in the kitchen was Custody Assistant Cheryl Lynch

trying to herd most of the 40 trustee workers away from the area. One inmate shouted to the hostage taker, "You're dead!" while another one yelled, "Kill her!"

Deputy Estrada weaved his way through the crowd until he could see what was happening; an inmate was in the corner holding Jail Cook Quinones hostage. Quinones was well known to the deputies as she was assigned to the officer's dining room and cooked them breakfast every morning.

Estrada carefully approached the desperate man and attempted to engage him in conversation. The Hispanic inmate did not speak English, so Estrada spoke to him in Spanish saying, "Let me have the lady."

The inmate responded, "No, I just want to go home."

After conversing for a little while, Estrada realized that the inmate had mental issues.

Firearms in the Jail

After the jail was completely locked down, Lt. Fred Cook ordered Deputy Dwendle Smith to bring an AR-15 into the kitchen. He also requested assistance from SEB's Special Weapons Team and hostage negotiator.

Negotiating with the Inmate

Rojo wanted to call his wife, so Estrada agreed saying, "Okay give me your wife's phone number so I can call her and arrange for you to go home."

Estrada made it a point to speak in a soft voice so Rojo could barely hear him. It gave them an excuse to stay close to the inmate.

Rojo asked, "Does that mean I can go home?"

Estrada told him, "Yeah, I'll call her right now."

Deputy Melville, who worked the kitchen and



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East Max Main Hallway

actually checked out the knife to the trustee, was standing next to Estrada. He didn't speak a lot of Spanish, but caught on to what Ben was doing. Pulling out his radio, he pretended it was a phone.

Estrada said, "My partner here has a phone, give me the number and we'll call your wife."

Rojo gave them his wife's phone number

and Melville, who could count from 1 to 10 in Spanish, wrote it down on his hand. Once he did, he held his hand up and moved closer so the inmate could see the numbers. Estrada came up next to Melville and asked the inmate if the phone number was correct.

Once the number was confirmed, Melville pretended to dial the radio as if it were a phone. He then acted like he was talking to the wife. Estrada said, "He's got your wife on the phone, she's on her way

down here so let the lady go."

The 5'10" inmate became more aggressive with the 4'9" hostage and said, "I'm not letting her go." He had one arm around the woman in a carotid hold while the other held the point of the knife to her throat. He then pulled her up on her toes and pressed harder on the knife. While this was taking place, the hostage was crying and praying that she would not be harmed.

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East Max Inmate Dorm

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Estrada warned the inmate, "Look, you're hurting her, and if you hurt her, I'm going to kill you."

Rojo looked around. Deputy Smith was steadying himself on a kitchen table while holding the AR-15 in a shooting stance. Sgt. Simon and Lt. Cook, who were standing back behind the deputies, both gave the inmate a thumbs down hand sign. It was then that the hostage felt Rojo's arms and legs start shaking and he loosened the grip on her neck.

Rescuing the Hostage

Finally, Estrada told the inmate that his wife was there to take him home. If he put the knife down and let the woman go, he was free to leave. They went back and forth several times with the inmate asking if this was for real, and Estrada assuring him it was. But then the inmate said, "I'm hanging onto the woman until I get out of here."

Estrada told him, "Okay you can keep the woman, but give me the knife."

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But then the inmate said, "I'm hanging onto the woman until I get out of here."

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Agreeing to hand over the knife, he turned it around so that Estrada could grab the handle, after which the other deputies rushed in, removed the woman and handcuffed the inmate. As he was taken from the kitchen, he still thought his wife was waiting for him and he was going home.

Changes

After this incident, the way knives in the jail kitchen were checked out and secured was

changed. In the past, knives were loose and kept in a white plastic holder attached to the inmate's belt. The new security procedures required that when a knife was issued, it had to be affixed to a metal cable similar to those used to lock a bicycle. That cable was then attached to the metal table where the inmate was working. This restricted movement sufficiently so that the only real danger was to the potatoes and onions waiting to be part of the next meal.

Recognition

Deputies Ben Estrada and Jonathan Melville were presented with the meritorious award for saving Cook Quinones' life. They were also honored in a pre-game ceremony at Dodger Stadium. 

Edited by Jan Jenkins (LASD Retired)

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