

Gunfight at the Pinnacle Peak

By Deputy Chris Miller (retired)
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Shortly before midnight on November 25th, 1978, Deputies Ken Moulton and Wilma Morris were at San Dimas Sheriff's Station, booking suspects they had just arrested at a large party in Covina. With their booking paperwork long from completed, they heard the station dispatcher announce over the public address system, "Any unit to handle, any unit to assist, 211 Silent at Pinnacle Peak Restaurant." A silent robbery alarm was activated at this popular Western themed restaurant barely a mile north of the station along historic Route 66.



Knowing that the unit patrolling San Dimas was busy on a call at the time and unavailable to respond, Deputies Moulton and Morris informed the jailer that they would finish booking their prisoners later and told the dispatcher that they would investigate the silent alarm. Moulton and Morris knew that this was a common call at Pinnacle Peak. They figured that one of the employees cleaning up the restaurant accidentally tripped the alarm again.

Still, all calls like this one need to be handled with the belief that they may be the real thing. So both deputies ran quickly out of the station and jumped into their radio car. Riding with them that night as an observer was Deputy Moulton's brother-in-law. He had aspirations to be a peace officer, and was on an official ride-along to see what being a cop was all about.

Sergeant Griffin, the field sergeant, also responded to Pinnacle Peak. He covered the front of the restaurant as Deputies Moulton and Morris went to the rear. Deputy Moulton ordered his brother-in-law to stay in the patrol car and to use the radio to call for help if he thought that they needed it. November 1978, was over a decade before deputies were equipped with handheld radios. So when trouble was encountered, a deputy needed to retreat back to their patrol car to request assistance. Moulton's brother-in-law eagerly agreed to this task fully expecting that nothing would be required of him.

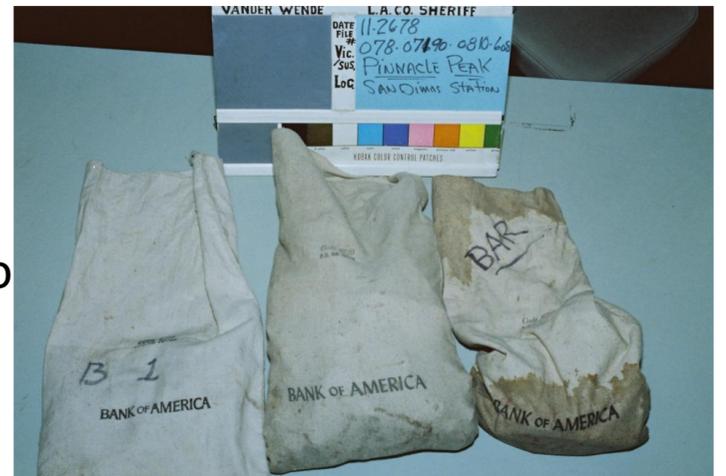
Pinnacle Peak had been closed for over an hour so Sergeant Griffin was not surprised when he discovered that the front door of the restaurant was locked. Despite several false alarms recently, Deputies Morris and Moulton still approached the rear of the location with all due caution. Wilma was armed with a shotgun and Ken held his revolver at the ready.





Both deputies knew that Pinnacle Peak's employees wore western garb consistent with the restaurant's theme. This actually caused a moment of confusion as the deputies entered the scullery near the restaurant's back entrance. As they entered this room, they heard the sound of loose coins being shaken together and peered around a dish washing machine to see where this sound was coming from. When they did they saw a man wearing a red bandana tied behind

his head covering his mouth. He was holding a money bag in his left hand and a sawed off shotgun in his right and looked like a stereotypical outlaw from an Old West movie. This caused Deputy Moulton to wonder at first why an employee would be messing around like this. His mind was not ready to process that this was a robbery suspect. The fact that the man was nonchalantly going about his business and did not at first notice him added to Moulton's confusion. That all changed when the man became aware of the deputies and began turning his shotgun toward them.



Instantly, Deputy Moulton realized this was no employee, but a robbery suspect. He yelled, "Freeze." And Deputy Morris echoed, "It's the police!" Wilma then noticed movement through a small opening between one of the dish washing machines and a wall and realized that there was a second suspect. She saw he also held a money bag and a shotgun.



This second suspect began turning his weapon toward the deputies and Wilma realized that he was about to fire at her, but the washing machine restricted her ability to get off a clear shot. The only way she could engage the suspect was to fire through a small opening underneath the washing machine where the suspect's legs were exposed. She fired a round from her shotgun striking the suspect. The effect of the round was so devastating it nearly took off the man's

leg and he crumbled to the ground. The first suspect continued turning his shotgun toward the deputies as he retreated into the other room. Deputy Moulton fired three rounds at this suspect, but missed. Both deputies then made a hasty retreat outside of the restaurant covering the exits with their weapons.

Needless to say, Deputy Moulton's brother-in-law proved to be a poor radio operator. Deputy Morris handed her shotgun to Moulton while she ran back to the radio car to request assistance and notify San Dimas units of the shooting and the suspects inside Pinnacle Peak.



What the deputies didn't know at the time was that there were in fact three suspects. They were all members of the Vagos outlaw motorcycle gang and held up the restaurant just after it closed. The suspects bound and gagged all of the employees, ordered them to the ground, then started going through the restaurant removing money from all of the cash registers. The silent alarm was triggered when the registers were opened.

With the suspects in control of the employees, the incident turned into a hostage situation. Additional patrol units responded and set up a containment. Station Detective Oliver called into the restaurant and began a dialog with the suspects. But as this conversation was taking place, the suspects realized that the rear door to the restaurant was not closed when the deputies exited. This door opened out; so anyone trying to close it would expose themselves to the deputies. The suspects believed that if the door remained open it would allow the deputies to rush in without any advanced notice. In order to prevent this, one of the male hostages was untied and a suspect held a shotgun to his head and instructed him to pull the door closed. The deputies could hear the suspect tell the employee, "Just get the door and pull it closed." They then observed a young employee approach the doorway shaking nervously with his hands in the air. He told the deputies "I'm a hostage. I have to close the door."



A suspect was behind the victim and could not see the deputies. Deputy Moulton did not say anything out loud, but mouthed the word "jump" to the hostage several times and indicated the direction where he wanted the man to leap to safety. The employee mustered up his courage, then looked over his left shoulder and jumped out of the doorway. Deputy Moulton fired two shotgun rounds into the door to prevent the suspect from chasing after the man to recapture him. It was later learned that several of the shotgun pellets ricocheted off the door and struck the suspect in the arm and grazed his forehead.

After this shooting took place, Detective Oliver told the suspects that if they harmed one hair on a hostage's head in retaliation, deputies would kill all of them. Oliver's manner was direct, but it was effective. The suspects realized that they were in a no win situation. The suspect shot by Deputy Morris was bleeding profusely and needed immediate medical attention.

The second suspect's injuries were not as bad, but he also needed help. Still, given that two of them were shot by the deputies, they were not feeling particularly trusting. Before any of them surrendered, they requested that the deputies contact the secretary of their motorcycle gang, a man known as "Terry the Tramp," and bring him to the scene to act as a neutral witness to their surrender. Deputies were sent to Terry's house. They got him out of bed and transported him to Pinnacle Peak. After Terry arrived, the first wounded suspect crawled out of the front of the restaurant and was transported to a hospital under guard. After three more hours of negotiation, the two remaining suspects surrendered. None of the hostages were injured.

No matter how many times a false alarm is received from a location you never know when it might be the real thing.

Fortunately, this gunfight ended with the bad guys in custody, no good guys injured and all the hostages safe.



And what did Deputy Moulton's brother-in-law think of his experience that evening? Well, he got a lot more than he bargained for on his ride-along. It gave him a chance to see just what risks came with a career in law enforcement and what it might require of him. Armed with this knowledge he chose to enter another profession.

(Compiled from an interview with Ken Moulton and reports written by Deputies Ken Moulton and Wilma Morris)

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Poster designed by Lieutenant Dan Waidner (Retired)