

SPECIAL OPERATIONS AND SEARCH TEAMS

By Deputy Chris Miller (retired)

© Los Angeles County Sheriff's Museum 2016



September 13, 1971, photo shows inmates at the Attica Correctional Facility as Authorities Retake Control

In 1971, a riot occurred in New York's Attica Correctional Facility, which resulted in 42 prison staff members being taken hostage. During the four days of negotiations, inmates dug defensive trenches, electrified metal gates, took over the prison command center, and stashed gasoline in places where it could be quickly lit in the event of an attempt to take back the prison.

When the inmates threatened to slit the throats of four corrections officers, Governor Nelson Rockefeller ordered that the facility be retaken by force. New York State Police helicopters circled, dropping tear gas into D Yard, which was occupied by more than 1,200 inmates holding prison guards and staff hostage. State troopers and National Guard soldiers fired non-stop into the smoke, even though they didn't have a single visible target. When the smoke cleared, 10 hostages and 29 inmates were dead and another 89 were seriously wounded.

Within a few years, the incident had been thoroughly evaluated. This resulted in the establishment of special teams of corrections officers who were trained to deal with situations before they erupted into riots. The evaluation of the Attica riot and lessons learned were developed into a class to train correctional personnel from around the country.

LASD's Custody Research Center and SOS Teams

In 1974, Chief John Knox of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's Custody Division established a Custody Research Center. This research center was comprised of a legal section, operations section, and manual section. The Center was the first of its kind in the country. Lieutenant Tom Lonergan was in charge.

In 1975, riots were occurring in prisons around the country. Prison officials were searching for solutions on how to deal with the violence. Several deputies approached Lieutenant Lonergan and expressed their concern about their lack of training in basic custody security and preparation for a jail riot.

The lieutenant knew about the class offered in New York and that it was based on lessons learned from the Attica prison riot. He decided to take a vacation and attend the class on his own. In the class, Lieutenant Lonergan learned that during the Attica riot, officers from the outside came in and were responsible for shooting the hostages. Lieutenant Lonergan did not want an outside force coming in to deal with a jail situation, especially someone that was unfamiliar with jail operations.



New York State Troopers at Attica Correctional Facility

Lieutenant Lonergan also learned about special teams of corrections officers that were trained to handle cell extractions and respond to major inmate disturbances.

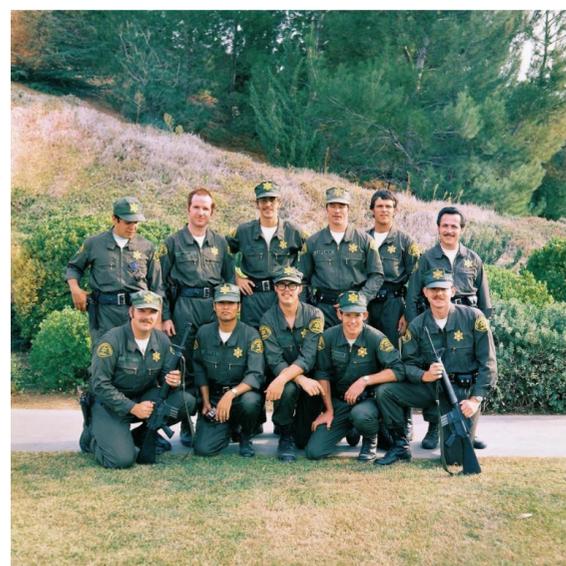
He felt that deputies working the Hall of Justice Jail could handle their own jail uprising if they formed special teams and were trained to control disturbances when they first began. Lieutenant Lonergan assigned Deputies Bill Pirie, Ron Landers and Jim DiGiovanna of the Headquarters Custody Unit to create a manual on a Special Operations and Search Team, also known as an SOS Team. The manual covered jail procedures, operations, searches, escorts and anything related to potential problems. Once the manual was complete, it was submitted to the Hall of Justice Jail Captain Craig Carpenter and then Chief Knox for approval.

The first SOS Team was formed on day shift at the Hall of Justice Jail to respond to violent situations. This team of elite deputies was trained by Lieutenant John Kolman from the Sheriff's Special Enforcement Bureau. Once the first SOS Team was established on day shift at the Hall of Justice Jail, other teams were formed to cover the PM and early morning shifts.

An article was printed in the Corrections Digest Magazine recognizing the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's SOS Team as an exemplary riot control program. It described this new program as a progressive display of some of the most innovative techniques in county corrections.



HOJJ SOS Teams receive their certificates with Lieutenant Lonergan (all 3 shifts)



(Top Row: L - R) Rudy Ortega, Chris Miller, Mark Utley, Mike Lefever, Fred Smith, James Leone (Bottom Row: L-R) Bob Beals, David Tellez, Dale Dubois, Steve Wilkinson, Robert Sedita

Chief Knox liked the idea of SOS Teams so much that he ordered the captains of other jail facilities to start their own teams.

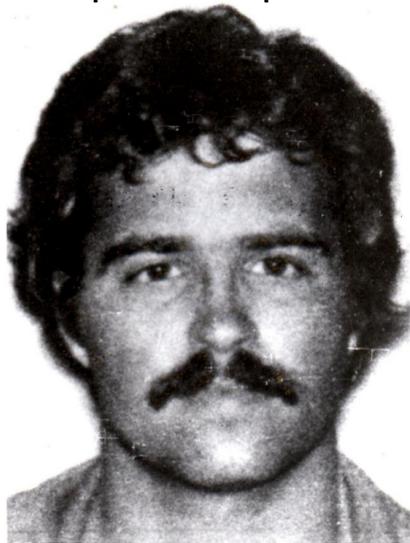
In 1975, an SOS Team was formed at each custody facility. The team members were issued Sheriff's jumpsuits with shoulder patches and cloth badges. The members ordered their own Class B name tags and had them sewn onto their jumpsuits. A green military web belt and boots were worn with the jumpsuit. Once they completed training, the team members were presented with certificates by their Division Chief.

Since the cell configuration was different for each facility, it was necessary for each facility to write its own SOS Team operations manual. The SOS Teams trained in cell extraction, but without the sophisticated equipment available today, such as ballistic shields and less-lethal weapons. Instead of a shield, team members held a mattress in front of them as they entered a cell in order to absorb any strikes from a violent inmate. The only protection they had was their helmets; they used their side-handle batons as impact weapons. Eventually Lieutenant Lonergan was able to obtain a shield for the SOS deputies. This prevented an inmate from impaling a deputy with a weapon, such as a shank or a broken broom handle. In addition to cell extraction training, riot control exercises were held on a regular basis.

High-Profile, High Security

The Hall of Justice Jail was considered a high-security jail. There were several reasons for this. Module 1310 was specifically built to confine Sirhan Sirhan after he killed Robert F. Kennedy. This cell area was isolated from the rest of the jail. It had its own kitchen and visiting area so inmates housed there would not have to leave for any reason.

Module 1010 was another high-security module that housed high-profile inmates. This module was adjacent to the Attorney Room so inmates didn't have to be moved far to visit with their attorneys. Inmates housed in the Hall of Justice Jail were escorted to court through an underground tunnel to the Criminal Courts Building across the street without exposing them to the public and risking an escape attempt.



William Harris - SLA

Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) members William and Emily Harris, who were involved in numerous bank robberies and the kidnapping of heiress Patty Hearst, were scheduled to be transferred to the Hall of Justice Jail for their Los Angeles trial. Security planning began prior to their arrival. The plan involved training the SOS Teams from all three shifts on the proper use of the AR-15 rifle. The Hall of Justice teams were the only ones trained to use the AR-15.



Emily Harris - SLA



Patty Hearst - Heiress

Security was high when William and Emily Harris arrived at the Hall of Justice Jail. Normally all female inmates were held at the Sybil Brand Institute for Women in East Los Angeles. It was unusual for one female to be held in a jail occupied by all male inmates. But for security reasons it was easier to house this husband and wife in the same facility. Since they were being tried together, they could meet with their attorney at the same time.

The Harrises were confined in the high-power cells of 1310, where Sirhan had been held. There were concerns that fellow SLA members might attempt to free the couple. Because of this, the jail was locked down whenever they received an attorney visit. The Attorney Room deputy, who was in charge of jail security, would sound two bells timed with flashing red lights, advising deputies

to lock down the jail and ordering all SOS Team members to respond to the Attorney Room. In addition to the armed deputy assigned in the Golden Gate Area, an SOS deputy armed with an AR-15 was positioned in the elevator landing. The idea was to show overwhelming firepower so that SLA visitors and attorneys knew that if they attempted to aid in an escape they would face several armed deputies. The attorneys and visitors were held on the first floor of the Hall of Justice until all armed deputies were in place.

Specialty Training

Lieutenant Lonergan felt that deputies working custody were not trained enough in search procedures. At the time, they didn't receive training in the academy on how to properly search jail cells or locate the unique hiding places that inmates had discovered and devised over the years. However, the SOS Teams were specially trained in such techniques. Proficiency exercises were held regularly to test their skills.



Deputy Chris Miller receives his SOS Team certificate from Chief Walt Howell



Lieutenant Lonergan (left) reads names on certificates. Chief Walt Howell presents certificate to SOS Team Member

Lieutenant Bill Rosensteel was the Operations Lieutenant who coordinated all of the SOS Teams during major search operations. Lieutenant Rosensteel would instruct SOS Teams from the Hall of Justice Jail, Central Jail, Sybil Brand Institute for Women and all of the jails located at Wayside to meet at the Inmate Reception Center on a Sunday at a designated time. Team members were not told beforehand what facility would be searched so that inmates were not tipped off if they overheard deputies discussing it. After briefing, team members were loaded onto Sheriff's transportation buses. While enroute, they were told what facility they would be searching. The captain of the jail facility to be searched was not notified until the SOS Teams arrived. This procedure was adopted after the teams searched their very first facility and found the inmates sitting on their bunks, awaiting what they apparently knew would be a massive search operation. It seems the jail captain had notified his personnel, who notified the inmates.

These operations were well planned, with deputies conducting systematic searches of each facility. In addition to SOS Team members, narcotics search dogs were used to look for drugs. It is not known what happened to these teams. It's possible they were dissolved when the Hall of Justice Jail closed or that they fell victim to a budget crisis.

Years later, Emergency Response Teams (ERT) were formed to handle the same type of problems that the SOS Teams handled. By the time the ERTs were formed, more specialized equipment was available, such as the pepperball guns, TASERs® and stingball grenades. These devices greatly enhanced the effectiveness of these teams.

But it was the SOS Teams that set the standard for handling cell extractions, inmate disturbances and the security of high-profile inmates. They were vital in keeping jail deputies safe while also protecting the safety of the inmates.



SOS Team Members (Top L-R) Deputies Bob Sedita, Chris Miller, Dave Tellez, Mike Lefever, Fred Smith, James Leone (Bottom L-R) Deputies Mark Utley, Tony Pradia, Dale Dubois, Bob Beals, Rudy Ortega, and Steve Wilkinson

A Moment in History by the © Los Angeles County Sheriff's Museum 2016

Poster designed by Lieutenant Dan Waidner (Retired)