

THE DISPATCHER

The Official Publication of the Association For Los Angeles Deputy Sheriffs



***"Battling the Plague of
Gangs in Our Community"***

SPECIAL EDITION



KILLED IN THE LINE OF DUTY: DEPUTY STEPHEN W. BLAIR

IN MEMORIAM

Deputy Stephen W. Blair

Safe Streets Bureau

Born: April 23, 1964

Entered Department: August 7, 1985

Killed in the Line of Duty: May 12, 1995

Another cop was killed on May 12, 1995. This cold-blooded murder of a law enforcement officer, a circumstance occurring far too frequently in our society, was committed by a gang member in Lynwood, Calif., a suburb of Los Angeles. Deputy Stephen Blair paid the ultimate price for serving and protecting a society that will soon forget his name. This same public, which is so apathetic about what happens in their communities as long as it does not happen to them, has allowed the gang subculture to exist and expand through acquiescence.

Deputy Blair strived to be a good cop. He worked hard, cared for the people in the community, and was well liked. Deputy Blair wanted to make life better for the people in the community where he worked. The city where he was killed is known for its infestation of gangs and drugs. Deputy Blair thought he could best impact the problem by focusing on the drugs and the gangs. He wanted to spe-

cialize in gangs and drugs. Because of his hard work, he was assigned to work the Gang Enforcement Team, a branch of the specialized Gang Unit for the Los Angeles County Sheriffs Department.

On May 12, 1995, Deputy Blair had only been assigned to the Gang Enforcement Team for a few weeks. Deputy Blair and his partner, Deputy Robert Lyons, were good, aggressive cops. They were not deterred by the aftermath of Rodney King and the Koltz Commission findings. We all know how the observation arrests among some police agencies have declined in the aftermath of Rodney King and the Koltz Commission. Deputy Blair and Deputy Lyons did nothing wrong that night. They simply did their job. They used the "meat and potatoes" method of most good cops – instinct and observation.

At approximately 8:50 p.m. on May 12, Deputies Blair and Lyons were on patrol in Lynwood near Ham Park. They had just turned westbound onto Walnut Street from Duncan Avenue when they observed two gang members walking westbound on the south sidewalk toward Ham Park. Just as gang members can spot an unmarked patrol unit at 1,000 yards, so can a good gang cop spot a gang member.

The mere presence of the deputies caused one of the gang members to

quickly develop black and white fever and nervously toss a handgun (later identified as a loaded .45 caliber automatic) onto the yard of an adjacent residence. Observing the actions of the one gang member, the deputies turned their vehicle toward the direction of the two gang members and exited their vehicle to investigate. What Blair and Lyons did not know was that the second gang member was armed with two handguns, one being a .44 Magnum revolver.

As Blair and Lyons exited their vehicle and approached the suspects to detain them, the second suspect, Freddie Fuiava (AKA Smokey), suddenly drew one of his weapons, the .44 Magnum revolver, and fired five shots at Blair. Blair must have seen the movement of Fuiava and anticipated a confrontation because two of the five shots fired at him struck him above his bullet-proof vest in a downward path (indicating Blair was crouched down drawing his own weapon). Deputy Blair was able to return fire, discharging five rounds from his 9mm Beretta and crawled to the rear of his patrol vehicle even though he was mortally wounded. Deputy Lyons helped his partner to cover and requested assistance. Deputy Blair uttered his last words and died in the arms of a female deputy sheriff. She and her partner, who arrived in seconds, were the first

unit to respond to the "Officer Down" call. They will never forget Deputy Stephen Blair.

Neither suspect was struck by the return fire. Both suspects fled in the aftermath of the Deputy Involved Shooting. Fuiava, a 23-year-old Samoan, fled westbound into Ham Park. The other suspect, Ernesto Avila (AKA Indio), a 23-year-old Hispanic, fled southbound between the residences.

Both suspects claimed membership in a Lynwood street gang called Young Crowd. Ironically, this street gang had its inception in the 1960s in the East Los Angeles area and actually started as a car club. Over the years, it slowly evolved into a violent street gang migrating to Lynwood. Also, very ironically, street gangs have evolved into what we see today – urban terrorists. Early on, street gangs would never commit crimes in their own neighborhoods. Street gangs would not prey on non-gang members as victims. Gang members would not assault or shoot at the police simply for the wrath that would befall them. Cop killers used to be the lowest form of scum in our society. Somewhere along the line, we have lost the impact of law enforcement officers getting killed. What the general public and society do not realize is that if criminals and gang members will shoot at the police, what chance are they going to have?

Fuiava and Avila were later identified and arrested thanks to the efforts of dedicated deputy sheriffs who take it very personally when one of their own is killed. A special task force was formed by the Los Angeles County Sheriffs Department Homicide Bureau headed by Sergeant Rey Verdugo, a veteran homicide investigator who has handled numerous Deputy Involved Shootings and experienced the bitter taste of other deputy murders, including the killing of Deputy Jack Williams. With the help of other special units, including Operation Safe Streets (O.S.S.), narcotics and patrol, the Homicide Task Force was able to bring the investigation to a successful conclusion quickly. Both suspects are in custody, and the case was filed and will be prosecuted by the C.A.P.O.S. (Crimes Against Police Officers) unit of the District Attorneys Office.

In the evolution of gangs, police have indeed become targets for gang members. It has now become a status symbol to

shoot or kill a cop. Why? Simple. The punishment does not fit the crime. We have made it too easy to commit crime and get away with it in our society. And the worst part of it all, most criminals, indeed most gang members, have it far better off when they are locked up. There is no longer a deterrent to committing crimes in our society. In the incarceration setting, criminals get three "hots" (meals), a cot, medical attention, dental care, an education, an occupation, visitation, color television, and other benefits. Out on the streets, gang members have to struggle. Incarceration has become a reward for committing crimes. It is far too attractive to go to jail. Simply, we are more concerned with the constitutional rights of the accused. We have lost the direction of the justice system because we have forgotten the rights of the victims and the rights of society.

Gangs and gang membership have plagued the Southern California area for more than 70 years. This subculture that

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began in the barrios and ghettos of our communities has gravitated to all parts of the country. This subculture has evolved into urban terrorism and ongoing criminal conspiracies. Gangs have changed since their inception, from fighting among themselves and preying on innocent victims to assaulting and killing the police.

Indeed, through ignorance and apathy, the general public has allowed this public menace to exist and grow. Through ignorance, they have placed themselves under the cloak of fear and intimidation of the gangs. They fear, and sometimes rightfully so, the retaliation from street gangs. Indeed, many of them live in the same communities. Through apathy, they believe if gang crime doesn't affect them directly, it is better not to get involved.

They perceive gangs and drugs to be a problem of law enforcement. Gangs and drugs affect everyone in our communi-

ties, and they're everyone's problem. Everyone, including police, parents, educators, churches, communities, and businesses, must work in a concerted effort to combat gangs and drugs if we want a solution.

Every time a cop dies in the line of duty, the crack in our system grows wider because no one, except us, seems to care anymore. We do care. Every time a cop dies, a piece of us dies with him or her. We have lost count of the funerals for cops in recent past. The numbers continue to grow. It hurts us so much knowing that society has lost a good cop and that cops like Deputy Blair will never hold their children again, never see their accomplishments, and never experience the pride in seeing them grow. Deputy Blair will never know if all his efforts were worthwhile or if they were in vain. He was rewarded with death. He will never be fulfilled in knowing that his efforts to change society for the better were not wasted.

Deputy Blair loved being a deputy sheriff. He loved working gangs. He loved making a difference in the communities where he worked because he impacted everybody. Deputy Blair died doing what he loved best. Since his death, some of the members of the suspect's own gang have openly said that Stephen Blair should not have been killed because he was a good cop, a fair cop.

The Los Angeles County Sheriffs Department lost one of its shining stars on May 12, 1995. We will never forget you, Deputy Stephen Blair. We hope the public and society will never forget you either. Because when you died, as when any cop dies, a little bit of society dies too.

We will only do something about the gangs and drugs when it affects the right person. Thousands of gang and drug-related deaths across our county are not sufficient to do something about these problems. The death of a cop or an innocent person is certainly not enough. We only seem to do something in this society when the right person is killed like when an affluent person is targeted, such as the killing of Karen Toshima in Westwood, Calif., near UCLA in 1987 or the shooting of three doctors in the emergency room of the County/USC Medical Center in 1993. Well, we believe that cops are indeed the right people, and society should take its head out of the sand and realize what is happening to all of us before it's too late. ■