



Stolen Bus, Once a TV 'Star,' Now Awaits Repair at RRC

(Dec. 18, 2001) Sad and sagging at the rear, Metro Bus 6589 now sits in a parking lot at the Regional Rebuild Center. But last Friday night, the Division 18 coach was the center attraction in a police drama that occupied more than three hours of local prime-time television.

PHOTOS BY LUIS INZUNZA

The incident began just after 7:30 p.m., when veteran Operator Joe Spears stepped out of his Line 119 bus at the Hawthorne layover, secured the coach and headed to the restroom.

According to police, Jose Luis Hernandez, 22, of Lynwood, boarded the bus, started it and drove off. When Spears discovered the bus was missing, he alerted the Bus Operations Control Center, which notified police – and the search was on.

Police helicopters, even news choppers, crisscrossed the skies looking for the wayward bus. It finally was spotted on the eastbound San Bernardino Freeway. When traffic blocked its movement, CHP officers placed a spike strip beneath the left rear wheel, hoping to disable the bus.

But, the suspect was determined and when traffic moved again, off he went – police in hot pursuit. The two-hour chase – illuminated by sparks as the bus frame dragged along the pavement – continued onto the 605 Freeway and then onto the 91 Freeway where it finally came to a halt just before the junction with the Santa Ana Freeway.



Photo shows damage to wheel well.

Drove without losing control

"I was amazed," says Tom Jasmin, BOCC superintendent, who responded to the incident in an MTA vehicle and was following police cars. "He must have known something about driving a big vehicle because, even with the left rear tires out, he was able to make the turn from the 605 onto the 90 without losing control."

While the suspect continued to occupy the stalled bus, Jasmin – along with Deputy Executive Officer John Roberts and Maintenance Superintendent Rick Hittinger – worked with the Fullerton Police Department SWAT team on ways to enter the bus.

At 10:50 p.m., following verbal instructions from police, the suspect jumped out the front door of the bus and lay on the ground while officers cuffed him.

"It was a team effort," Jasmin says. "The main thing is that they got the person out without injuring him or an officer or doing any further damage to the bus."

A preliminary inspection of the coach, which is still a crime scene and is surrounded by police tape, indicates it didn't sustain extensive damage.

According to Harold Peterson and Gary Eller of the RRC's Equipment Maintenance department, there was no damage to the CNG tanks, but the suspension, tire rims, frame and wheelwell were damaged. Repairs will begin when police release the bus probably later this week.

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