

Deputies Respond with Force in Metro Rail 'Hostage' Scenario

By BILL HEARD, Editor

(Dec. 10, 2002) "Keep your hands! Keep your hands up!" Holding their pistols in a combat grip, a pair of Sheriff's deputies stalks down the aisle of a Metro Blue Line train, concentrating on a "suspect" crouched in the shadows of the darkened car.

At the other end of the car crouches Metro Rail Transportation Operations Supervisor Hector Gutierrez, playing the "suspect" in this hostage takeover exercise. In the seats between, employees playing "hostages" try to stay out of the line of fire.

Three times the morning of Dec. 4, groups of deputies ran through a "tactical training drill" staged in a train storage shed at Metro Blue Line Division 11. Following each event, they gathered to critique their methods and listen to ideas from exercise observers.

"It's preparation," said Division Manager Duane Martin. "Our law enforcement people, our supervisors, controllers and train operators must be prepared for a worst-case scenario. Responding police agencies should be able to handle a situation as efficiently and safely as possible."

For the drill, the deputies switched the barrels of their pistols to a configuration that would accommodate paint ball shells. They, along with the "suspects" and "passengers," wore special masks to protect their faces and eyes. Good thing, too, because a number of "shots" were fired and participants were splattered with paint.

Realistic as possible

"We've made this exercise as realistic as possible," said Sheriff's Lt. Mike Parker. "In reality, it would be a few deputy sheriffs having to deal with something like this within a few minutes of it's happening."

Officers would face a number of difficulties in handling such a situation, Parker explained, including the confined space of a subway tunnel or the open space around a light-rail train,

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approaching and boarding a train from ground level, and preventing injuries to patrons.

Unknowns in such a situation include the number of passengers aboard the train, the number of suspects, whether they're armed and with what types of weapons, as well as their ultimate intentions.

Parker advises those involved to "be a good witness. The better the understanding we have of the situation, the better the description we have of the suspects and the weapons, the better the job we can do."

Martin notes that the operator would be the most important source of information for officers faced with handling a hostage takeover or other emergency situation aboard a train.

"Time is on our side in many circumstances," said Parker. "But, once someone fires a weapon, time is no longer on our side and we have to go in aggressively. For the deputies, it is one of the most dangerous things we would have to do."

Like other rail operators, MTA is required by the California Public Utilities Commission to conduct various types of emergency drills each year. A drill is scheduled, Wednesday, on the Metro Gold Line and others will be conducted in the months to come.

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