

THE SCR TD TRADITION AN INCREDIBLE RESPONSE

A TRANSIT HISTORY ARTICLE
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On the afternoon of April 29th 1992 following the acquittal in a Simi Valley courthouse of four Los Angeles Police Officers involved with a videotaped beating set off a series of events that descended the City of Los Angeles into a chain of violence and destruction that would last for a week.

The rioting and violence erupted from intersections such as Florence and Normandie around 4pm where angry mobs would begin robbing and beating motorists as well as looting business, setting fires to property, and letting bedlam loose to anyone or anything in their path.

One of the most immediate things causing the surge of the violence was a lack of police presence as LAPD had recalled all officers to their stations leaving anyone on the street including the buses and personnel of the Southern California Rapid Transit District caught in the middle of the warfare.

Buses began to get caught in blockaded locations and many passengers and bus operators would be systematically robbed and beaten inside buses for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. One SCRTD supervisor was beaten and left unconscious in his unit amid the melee until a SCRTD Transit Police unit was able to rescue him from the location.

The events unfolding in South Los Angeles rapidly expanded across the map as the SCRTD Bus Operations Control Center located at the headquarters building at 425 S. Main Street in Downtown LA began reacting to the situation. The immediate concern became how to get the passengers stuck on the buses still in service and at bus stops home safely and at the same time protect the drivers caught out on the streets in the buses.

With the buses increasingly becoming targets of violence it became clear by 6pm that all buses needed to be taken off the street. BOC immediately began instructing buses to pull in to their home or nearest Division based on what was going on in the areas where they were operating through.

Many operators spent the night stuck at other Divisions until safe to travel. The row of pay phones at the Divisions became the key lifeline to operators calling home to check in with families in the era before the cell phone.

On April 30th Division 5 was pressed into emergency service as the staging area and command post for all Disaster recovery operations. The majority of buses were cleared out and moved to Divisions 2, 7, and 18 with operators distributed to those locations as well as a contingent kept at Division 5 itself assisting with moving emergency responders.

The location of the SCRTD Division 5 yard at 54th & Van Ness became the ideal location to stage the emergency response. Its high cement walls were built far taller than the buses to keep out vandals and gunshots at the buses.

The maintenance staff would support fueling and repairing hundreds of Police Vehicles, Fire Engines, and Military Humvee's coming into the Command Post with embedded Diesel and Gasoline tanks on site. Even Police helicopters were landing on an improvised helipad with a fuel tanker truck in place to keep them operating. An on-site Coroner trailer was at the ready.

Buses from Divisions system wide would be used to transport Police, Fire, Military, and other responders who were flying in to Southern California Airports from across the country. SCRTD buses were also held in staging areas outside Police and Sheriff Stations as well as the LAPD Academy to assist response with "900 SPECIAL" on their headsigns.

As nearly every form of transportation was suspended from operating into the greater Los Angeles area the SCRTD still managed to maintain a level of passenger service in safe areas while assisting with emergency response.

However the Foothill Transit Zone decided it was too dangerous to operate West of El Monte Station and suspended service on Line 480 past that point stranding their passengers fearing their pretty little buses might get damaged. Ready for the task the SCRTD ran that half of the 480 route after having had the line taken from them and given to Foothill previously.

At the beginning of emergency operations California Governor Pete Wilson had called in CHP units from stations Statewide to assist Los Angeles Police, yet within a short time those CHP would be recalled to their home stations.

One noteworthy incident took place with a bus full of LAPD officers outside of Parker Center. The commanding officer on board requested the SCRTD dispatchers to call CHP for an escort. The SCRTD dispatcher had been told by CHP that all units have left the area. The LAPD commanding officer took the radio handset and instructed the dispatcher "No way am I taking a busload of officers in Riot gear into the Hellzone without an escort!" so after some phone calls the SCRTD dispatcher was able to get the assistance of the SCRTD Transit Police to escort those buses into The Hellzone.

In many cases the bus operator was the only person on the bus not wearing a flak-jacket. SCRTD buses would assist in transporting prisoners taken during mass arrests and protests such as those held in front of the LA Times building

at 1st & Broadway on May 2nd where visiting Bakersfield Police and Kern County Sheriffs loaded arrestees into SCRTD buses and on to jail.

As the week wore on additional Police and Military troops were able to restore order to the area. Calm slowly returned as fires from the charred landscape of destroyed buildings and property smoldered.

One of the final special duties the SCRTD was requested to do was on May 7th to provide transportation to the United States Secret Service Agents who were part of the protection detail for the 41st President of the United States George Herbert Walker Bush during his tour of the wrecked city.

The call for two buses lasted two days, and included SCRTD show bus #1972 and 1987 from Division 1 where they were instructed to pick the Special Agents for the Presidential Protection Detail up at the Biltmore Hotel and take them to the Boys & Girls Club in South LA where the President was to hold an event addressing the community and praising a group of LAPD officers who were the first to go into the Rioting.

The buses were given a secondary use besides transporting agents when they became used as barriers in the alleyway that ran alongside of the entrance to the location to obscure the view of the route President Bush took coming in and out of his Limousine. Interestingly the SCRTD employees were able to sit in bus 1972 and look out at the President as he arrived. The President even smiled and waved at them as slightly irritated looking Special Agents watched them from the other side of the fence that separated them.

After it was all over a special SCRTD bus route was temporarily put into effect running through South Central LA servicing food distribution centers to areas heavily affected by the destruction of supermarkets and stores in the area. The route ran for 10 days and charged 25c a ride.

Much of this history would have been lost had it not been for a fortunate gift to this author of a group of photos that were taken behind the scenes of these events by an SCRTD employee who was aware that important history was underway. Slated to be discarded to the trash but now preserved forever these amazing images paint just a small part of the huge story the SCRTD and its employees made as part of their everyday work duties and assistance alongside the combined responders marking this period in American history.

To this we dedicate to all those who went Above and Beyond the Call of Duty 25 years ago.

-Los Angeles April 2017

SCRTD PERSONNEL AND BUSES MOVING THE RESPONSE



SCRTD DIVISION 5 SAVES THE DAY



THE COMMAND POST



PRISONER TRANSPORTATION 1ST & BROADWAY



HAULING POLICE AND TROOPS INTO THE HELLZONE



HELPING THE STRANDED PASSENGERS OF LINE 480



HELPING THE RESPONSE



TRANSPORTING THE PRESIDENT'S MEN

