

Los Angeles Sheriff threatens violence, reporter arrested after shooting of deputies

By John Andrews
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Surveillance video captured a man walking up to a parked Los Angeles Sheriff's Department (LASD) vehicle Saturday evening. Two deputies, a 31-year-old female and a 24-year-old male, were sitting inside. The man suddenly pulled a handgun and fired several rounds through the passenger window, striking both deputies in their heads. He fled on foot.

The injured deputies were rushed to St. Francis Hospital, a trauma center. As of this writing, both are in stable condition and are expected to survive. The extent of their residual injuries and other complications will not be known for some time but will likely be substantial.

No suspect has been identified nor any motive offered. The LASD has described the only available description as "highly generic," perhaps a black male in his late 20s. An intense investigation is underway, and Los Angeles County is offering a \$100,000 reward for further information.

The deputies appeared to have been targeted at random. Both had been deputies for only fourteen months and were working for the Transit Policing Division, which is responsible for law enforcement on a portion of Los Angeles County's woefully inadequate light rail system, considered a soft assignment appropriate for inexperienced deputies.

The deputies were shot outside the Compton Metro Station. The city of Compton is among the most impoverished working-class communities in Southern California with a history of law enforcement misconduct and violence. After a series of scandals and excessive-force lawsuits, the city's police department was disbanded 20 years ago and replaced by an LASD substation, which has become even more brutal and scandal-ridden.

Recent litigation, including a whistleblower lawsuit

brought by a deputy who claims he was threatened by other deputies, has revealed that current deputies assigned to the Compton Substation formed a covert white supremacist gang, calling themselves "The Executioners," each with a matching tattoo of a skull figure wearing a Nazi helmet and carrying an assault rifle. The Executioners are reported to celebrate deputy shootings and the induction of new members with "inking parties." The recent exposure of an Executioner tattoo during a wrongful death lawsuit resulted in a \$7 million settlement for the victim's survivors.

Last year, Ryan Twyman, 24, died after two Compton deputies fired 34 rounds while he was sitting in his car unarmed. On June 18, Compton deputies killed Andres Guardado, an 18-year-old security guard. His autopsy revealed five bullet wounds in the back.

Bicyclist Dijon Kizzee was shot multiple times on August 31, a murder captured on a surveillance video that shows he too was shot in the back while not posing a threat to the deputies.

Most recently, last Thursday deputies shot and killed a man while serving a search warrant at a Compton home, allegedly after an exchange of gunfire.

The recent shootings intensified protests against police violence that have been ongoing since the Minneapolis murder of George Floyd last May.

Without a shred of evidence, however, at a news conference held outside the hospital four hours after the shooting, Sheriff Alex Villanueva, surrounded by uniformed deputies and wearing a bulletproof vest, attributed the Transit deputies' shooting to recent protests and anger over police violence. "Actions, words have consequence," he said. "And our job does not get any easier because people don't like law enforcement."

Both presidential candidates amplified Villanueva's reactionary, antidemocratic threats. Trump retweeted the surveillance video, declaring, "Animals that must be hit hard!" Trump's use of dehumanizing language in the plural, when the video clearly shows a single perpetrator who appears to be acting alone, is a clear threat to wide layers of anti-police demonstrators and critics, whom he lumps together with a minuscule criminal fringe rife with provocateurs.

In a prepared statement, Democrat Joe Biden echoed Trump, albeit while giving some lip service to the demonstrators, declaring, "These acts of lawlessness and violence directed against police officers are unacceptable, outrageous, and entirely counterproductive to the pursuit of greater peace and justice in America—as are the actions of those who cheer such attacks on." Biden did not specify who these "cheerleaders" might be.

Deputies, taking their cue from Trump and Villanueva, began retaliating almost immediately.

Josie Huang, a respected local reporter for local National Public Radio station KPCC who also writes for the LAist news blog, was posting a preliminary report on Villanueva's news conference shortly after 11:00 p.m. when she heard a ruckus. No more than a half dozen loud protesters assembled on the sidewalk in front of the hospital driveway and were taunting deputies with puerile chants of "It's a celebration," and "Hope they die." When a deputy pointed a 40 millimeter "less lethal" projectile launcher, one of the demonstrators responded, "If you want to fire the shot, fire the shot."

No shots were fired. Instead, the deputies ordered the individuals to disperse and forced them to leave. A group of about a dozen deputies followed the demonstrators, and Huang followed the deputies, video recording their actions with her cell phone. Suddenly, deputies grabbed one of the demonstrators and took him down onto the asphalt, piled on his back and handcuffed him. He was thrown into a police car, under arrest on trumped-up charges of impeding nonexistent traffic into the hospital. Other demonstrators ran away.

Deputies then attacked Huang, simultaneously ordering her to "back the fuck up" while tackling her to the asphalt, where five deputies held her down for handcuffing.

Huang's phone was knocked to the ground, still

recording. A deputy deliberately stepped on it, extinguishing the image. Somehow the phone was recovered by another reporter, and its recordings survived. They are available on Huang's Twitter feed.

After her arrest, the LASD tweeted that Huang had refused to identify herself as media and lacked the appropriate credentials. The violent assault on Huang was captured on video by a nearby ABC television news crew, however. Huang's press pass is clearly visible hanging from a lanyard around her neck, and she can be heard yelling repeatedly that she is a reporter with KPCC.

After being jerked to her feet and thrown into an LASD car, Huang was taken to the women's jail, where she was released five hours later with visible bruises and scrapes, a sore shoulder and a black eye. She was issued a citation to appear in court on charges of obstruction.

KPCC issued a statement calling Huang's "arrest the latest in a series of troubling interactions between our reporters and some local law enforcement officers. Journalists provide an essential service, providing fair, accurate and timely journalism and without them, our democracy is at risk."

While the roughing up and arrest of reporters and protesters has become commonplace, incidents such as last Saturday's shooting of the Transit deputies are very rare. According to FBI statistics, last year in the United States as a whole just 48 law enforcement officers were killed by suspects while in the line of duty. That averages less than one a week. In contrast, there are more than 1,000 law enforcement killings each year, an average of one every eight hours.

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