

LAPD

Honoring the Bravest

Police Dept. honors 25 officers in its annual Medal of Valor ceremony.

Stories and photos courtesy LAPD

On May 28, the LAPD honored 25 officers – including five women, a record for the event – with the Department's Medal of Valor, its highest honor.

The Medal of Valor is bestowed upon officers who "performed an act displaying extreme courage while consciously facing imminent peril," according to the award guidelines.

The stories of their heroism follow. The Club congratulates each of the 25 officers for earning this prestigious award.

OFFICERS HERIBERTO SALAZAR, LAURA GONZALEZ, HAYLEY SMITH, VINCENT ROJAS

■ Apartment Fire

On May 5, 2008, in the morning, Officers Heriberto Salazar and Laura Gonzalez, assigned to Devonshire Division, and Officers Hayley Smith and Vincent Rojas, working Mission Division, had just been released from a Command Post in West Valley Division. Both patrol units were driving back to their respective areas when they saw smoke coming from a fire at an apartment complex at Parthenia Street and Owensmouth Avenue. All four officers, without hesitation, rushed to the building. The Fire Department had not yet arrived. Officers Salazar, Gonzalez, Smith and Rojas saw several residents running from the burning complex and realized they needed to get everyone out quickly. They knew that waiting for the Fire Department to arrive wasn't an option, so the four officers risked their own lives and entered the burning building so they could rescue and coordinate evacuation for the residents. Working as a team, Officers Salazar, Gonzalez, Smith and Rojas moved through the apartment complex and a safe-



Police Officer Heriberto Salazar



Police Officer Laura Gonzalez

eternity, within minutes Officers Gonzalez and Smith cleared the complex and relocated the residents to a safe place across the street. As the last residents from the burning building were placed out of harm's way, the Fire Department arrived and assumed command. All of the officers suffered smoke inhalation and were taken to a nearby hospital for treatment. They were all later released from the hospital. Had it not been for the quick actions of the four officers, the residents of the burning building may not have escaped without harm or serious injury.



Police Officer Hayley Smith



Police Officer Vincent Rojas

Officers Salazar, Gonzalez, Smith and Rojas are commended for their heroic actions, courage, and for sacrificing their own safety in an effort to save lives. Without the decisive actions of these four officers, many of the residents of the apartment complex could have died. Officers Salazar, Gonzalez, Smith and Rojas exemplify teamwork, an unselfish response to the needs of the community and dedication to public service.

OFFICERS PETER VANDERBURGH, FERNANDO AVILA

■ Store Altercation

Sunday evening Sept. 30, 2001, appeared as business as usual at the Macy's Department store in Woodland Hills.

Just after 5 p.m., two men walked into the department store to the fine-jewelry counter to look at a ring. Suspect 1 told the sales clerk he had gotten into a fight with his girlfriend and wanted to buy a diamond ring to make up with her. The sales clerk noticed both men appeared drunk. She had a "bad" feeling about the men, so she asked them to wait and she went into a small office and called security. She told security there were two drunken men in her department and felt uncomfortable waiting on them.

Moments later, the department store manager arrived to wait on the suspects. Suspect 1 told the manager that he wanted to buy a ring and he reached into his pocket and pulled out a roll of hundred-dollar bills. The manager took a diamond ring out of the display case and placed it on the counter. Suddenly, the suspect picked up the ring, pulled a gun out of his pocket and pointed it at the manager shouting, "Give it all to me!"

The manager began removing jewelry items from the display case and handing them to the suspect, who in turn stuffed them into his pocket.



Police Officer Peter Vanderburgh

He then turned toward the sales clerk, who was standing behind the cash register. Suspect 2, who had been pacing behind Suspect 1, placed a black plastic bag on the counter. Suspect 1 then began to put the jewelry inside the bag. The sales clerk walked toward the register at the other end of the counter, but as she walked past the door of the office, she slipped and fell. Suspect 2 saw the sales clerk fall and he began to pace nervously.

Realizing that the sales clerk had fallen in the office, Suspect 1 began to grab jewelry with a sense of urgency. He placed the gun on top of the counter so he could use both hands. Realizing a window of opportunity, the store manager grabbed the gun off the counter and stepped back against the rear wall and out of Suspect 1's reach.

Without warning, Suspect 1 jumped over the counter and began to fight for the gun with the store manager. The suspect and manager exchanged punches as the manager fought to keep control of the weapon. During the struggle, a shot was fired but luckily no one was hit.

Suspect 2 then turned and pointed his gun at the two officers.

Fearing for their lives and the lives of the store employees, Officers Vanderburgh and Avila opened fire and hit the suspect. Officer Vanderburgh continued to order the suspect to drop his gun, but he did not.

Officer Vanderburgh fired a second shot at the suspect, forcing him backwards against the wall. Still standing, the suspect was again ordered to drop his weapon. The suspect ignored the commands and again pointed his gun at both officers.

Still fearing for their lives, Officer Vanderburgh fired a third round at the suspect. He fell to the floor behind the counter, still clutching the gun. The two officers went behind the counter, where the suspect pointed his weapon again toward the officers. Officer Vanderburgh fired a fourth shot at the suspect, causing him to finally drop the weapon. Officer Avila then approached the suspect and handcuffed him.

Officer Vanderburgh and Officer Avila are commended for their selfless courage and bravery. Their actions in the face of imminent peril are the result of a level of gallantry not seen in your average individual. Their level of heroism and professionalism are second to none.



Police Officer Fernando Avila

SGT. CHRISTOPHER GOMEZ



Sgt. Christopher Gomez

Car Fire

On Aug. 16, 2006, early in the morning, Sgt. Christopher Gomez, assigned to Newton Patrol, was driving south on the 110 Freeway from Vernon Avenue, when he saw a black Nissan Sentra get on the freeway going about 100 miles an hour. As the car neared Imperial Highway, it swerved to avoid hitting another vehicle and spun out of control, colliding with the center divider.

Sgt. Gomez raced to the car, which was now on fire. The driver's door was pinned against the center divider, making it impossible to open. Sgt. Gomez saw that the driver was the only person in the car, and realized the man was now trapped inside the burning vehicle. Sgt. Gomez

tried to open the passenger side door, but it was jammed. Without hesitating, Sgt. Gomez smashed the passenger window with his police baton. The car's dashboard caught on fire. Sgt. Gomez could hear loud popping noises, could see the flames and feel the heat of the fire. With the passenger compartment burning and with total disregard for his own safety, Sgt. Gomez used tremendous strength and pulled the driver out of the car through the flames and out the passenger door window. After pulling the man from the car, Sgt. Gomez dragged him to safety.

Moments later, a news photographer arrived at the scene and began videotaping the car, which was now completely engulfed in flames. The video is proof that Sgt. Gomez had not risked his own safety to pull the driver out of the car, the driver would have survived.

The driver was taken to a nearby hospital, where he was treated for a broken collarbone and smoke inhalation. He said if it were not for Sgt. Gomez' quick action, he would not have been able to get out of the car on his own. The driver said Sgt. Gomez saved his life, and did it without thinking of his own safety.

Sgt. Gomez is commended for his heroic actions and for sacrificing his own safety to save the most generous and courageous person he could find. Sgt. Gomez bravely and selflessly demonstrated the noble and gallant character expected of a Los Angeles Police officer. The danger and selflessness of the driver's situation, and the admirable and determined actions of Sgt. Gomez, are a testament to public safety.



OFFICER JESUS CARRILLO



Police Officer Jesus Carrillo

Foot Pursuit

On Sept. 3, 2007, in the evening, Officer Jesus Carrillo of 77th Street Area Gang Enforcement Detail, and his partner were on their regular patrol in South Los Angeles. While driving in the area of 83rd Street and Stanford Avenue, the two officers saw a Cadillac SUV with a female driver and male passenger run through a stop sign. As the officers followed the vehicle, they requested information to see if the car had been reported stolen. It had not.

Officer Carrillo and his partner decided to pull the vehicle over for the traffic violation, but the driver of the SUV wouldn't pull over. While following the vehicle, the officers saw what looked like the male passenger reaching under his seat. Relying on their training and experience, the officers knew that the passenger could be hiding contraband or reaching for a weapon.

While the SUV continued slowly down the street, the male passenger suddenly jumped out

of the car and ran down a sidewalk. Officer Carrillo and his partner chased the suspect, they saw him running with a bright light in one hand and a handgun in the other. Both officers took cover and positioned themselves so they could see the suspect from a safe distance. The man, while trying to jump over a wrought-iron gate, caught his clothing on metal spikes at the top of the gate. With both of his hands elevated, he used his horizontal support bar, he tried to use his clothing from the gate as a shield.

Officer Carrillo and his partner bravely approached the suspect, telling him to jump over their side of the fence. The suspect was leaning his body weight to press through the gate. Officer Carrillo approached the suspect and tried to pull the suspect to his side of the gate. That is when the suspect grabbed the officer by the neck. At this point, the suspect's hands were reaching for a weapon. Officer Carrillo thinking quickly, reached through the gate to get the gun before the suspect could. Officer Carrillo is known for worldwide

nothing open, forcing him from the gate. The suspect on his feet and jumped for the gate, just as Officer Carrillo did. Now the officer and the suspect were in a life and death struggle.

During this struggle, the suspect turned the barrel of the gun toward Officer Carrillo's neck. Unable to reach the service pistol, Officer Carrillo twisted the gun into the suspect's back. The suspect was so startled by this unexpected action that he dropped the gun. Officer Carrillo picked up the gun and pointed it at the suspect's head. Officer Carrillo told the suspect to drop the gun. The suspect refused. Officer Carrillo fired one shot into the suspect's back. The suspect fell to the ground. Officer Carrillo is known for worldwide

OFFICER JEANETTE FLORES



Police Officer Jeanette Flores

A Case of Domestic Violence

On Aug. 9, 2007 at night, Officer Jeanette Flores and her partner, assigned to Hollenbeck Area, responded to a domestic violence radio call. The victim, who was nine months pregnant, told the officers that her common-law husband punched her in the face and stomach and had run from their house. After documenting the woman's injuries, Officer Flores stayed with the victim while her partner went to their squad car to get the reports necessary to document the assault.

While walking back to the victim's house, Officer Flores' partner saw a man standing on the sidewalk who matched the physical description of the suspect. The officer ordered the man to place his hands behind his head and made his approach to handcuff the suspect.

As one handcuff was attached to the suspect's right wrist, the suspect turned clockwise and thrust his left arm around the officer's neck. The suspect now had the officer in a stranglehold. Officer Flores did not hesitate to assist her partner. She jumped on the suspect's back and wrapped her right arm around his neck to restrain him.

The suspect's attack turned vicious. He used his body weight to drive the officer he was holding head first onto the concrete, knocking him unconscious. Officer Flores was unable to keep her hold on the suspect and tried to distract him with three punches to the head. She heard the unmistakable sound of the unsnapping of the retention strap of her partner's gun holster. As the suspect reached for her partner's gun, Officer Flores made the split-second decision to save their lives and fired one shot to the suspect's head, ending the deadly threat.

The injured officer was taken to a local hospital, where he was treated for a fractured left arm and a fractured right hip.

Officer Flores is commended for her tactical skills and for her quick reaction to a violent suspect who had attacked an officer of the law and was attempting to use a police officer's firearm against them. If it were not for Officer Flores' quick reaction, the suspect would have surely shot, and possibly killed both officers.

Officer Jeanette Flores' tactical skills, teamwork, clear and collected thinking in an exceptionally dangerous situation, and her ability to function under the most stressful, chaotic and perilous conditions embody the finest traditions of the Los Angeles Police Department.

LAPD MEDAL OF VALOR

LAPD

Honoring The Bravest

- Continued



LAPD MEDAL OF VALOR

**SGTS. GINA HOLMSTROM, SEAN KINCHLA, CHESTER MCMILLION;
OFFICERS MAURA TERCERO, JEFFREY ENNIS, LYMAN DOSTER, BENJAMIN SANTERO, ENRIQUE ANZALDO,
DANIEL SANCHEZ, EDUARDO PEREZ, DENNIS O'SULLIVAN, ROBERT GALLEGOS, DAVID STAMBAUGH,
WILLIAM CASEY, JOSEPH RUBERT; RETIRED OFFICER TODD RHEINGOLD**

#136641

Hostage Rescue

On Sunday, July 10, 2009, a desperate 16-year-old girl who had been locked behind a chain-link fence in Southeast Los Angeles.

Southeast Division patrol officer and the teenage girl locked behind a chain-link fence. Her stepfather came out of the car lot office carrying his 19-month-old daughter in his arms. After talking to the officers, the stepfather retreated to his office and began shooting at officers and his stepdaughter. The officers broadcasted a "help call."

Officer Gina Holmstrom assigned Metropolitan Division, heard the help call, responded and took tactical command of the incident. Officers from several divisions responded. Among them were Officer Maura Tercero, Officer Sean Kinchla, Officer Jeffrey Ennis, Officer Lyman Doster and Officer Benjamin Santero.

While the suspect continued to shoot at his stepdaughter and the officers, Officer Ennis and Doster geared up with their urban police rifles, and quickly formulated a rescue plan. Ennis briefed Santero and assigned to him the responsibility of reaching the high ground. Officers Kinchla and Tercero, without hesitation, volunteered for the dangerous task of being the rescue officers.

With help from the LAPD Airship, Holmstrom devised a plan to safely approach the girl.

Working as a team, the officers moved forward and reached the cover of a police car. There they found several of their fellow officers crouched down, unable to move as they too were under hostile gunfire.

Now close to the teenager, Holmstrom began talking to her, telling her to stay down. The teenager was paralyzed with fear, lying between two parked cars. Realizing a bolt cutter was needed to cut the fence, Kinchla placed himself at great risk and ran from the safety of cover to retrieve the bolt cutter. After obtaining the bolt cutter, Kinchla returned to the rescue team.

With the team now ready to rescue the trapped victim, the officers stepped away from their cover and moved toward the gate in a diamond formation. As soon as they left cover, the suspect again opened fire on the advancing team. However, the rescue team was deter-

mined to continue their efforts to save the same 16-year-old girl.

Officer Doster and his partner expressed their stomachs to the gate and made several attempts to break the fence with the bolt cutters. However, the suspect fired numerous rounds at them, which impacted with a lot of force. At this moment, SWAT personnel, including Officer Enrique Anzaldo, Officer Daniel Sanchez, Officer Eduardo Perez,

Officer Dennis O'Sullivan, arrived to assist Officer William Sanchez and Perez. They provided cover for the rescue team.

Officer Anzaldo expressed himself to the gate. Anzaldo then left his position to help Officer Tercero grab the teenage girl. Officer O'Sullivan fired one round at the suspect's head of fire. Soon additional SWAT personnel arrived, including Officer Robert Gallegos, Officer Chester McMillion, Officer David Stambaugh, Officer William Casey, Officer Todd Rheingold,

and Officer Joseph Rubert. For the next hour, information about the suspect was obtained and negotiations with the gunman were made.

SWAT officers trained as crisis negotiators, encouraged the suspect to let his daughter go and surrender, believing the suspect was about to harm his daughter. O'Sullivan fired one round at him. The suspect spun to his left and dropped to the ground on his view.

In the attempt to save the life of the 19-month-old Perez, Sanchez, Gallegos, Casey, McMillion and Stambaugh initiated a rescue plan. As the rescue team approached the office entrance, the suspect ran into the office, still holding his daughter, and began firing his weapon through the drywall at the approaching officers.

Officer Sanchez was the first to enter the work bay and provided cover for his fellow officers. As Sanchez moved toward the office, he felt a sharp pain in his right shoulder and knew he had been shot. The remaining officers lined up along the wall and the suspect continued shooting at them through the dry wall, showering the officers with bullets and debris.

Once inside, the officers entered the office and provided cover for the officer before them.

Knowing Sanchez was wounded, Gallegos used his body as a shield to protect him and engaged the suspect.

Officer McMillion moved toward the door as the gun battle erupted and provided direction. With bullets and debris coming through the drywall, Rubert and Stambaugh entered the office and physically extracted Sanchez. Anzaldo and Rheingold were the last to enter the bay area to assist with the rescue.

The 16 officers had never trained together for this event. They all responded and trusted one another. Each Officer relied on the training they had received. Each performed with exemplary skill, courage and professionalism. They put their own lives on the line to

save a 16-year-old teenager and a 19-month-old baby they had never met. They never hesitated, no matter the risk. Each Officer is recognized for their bravery, courage, teamwork and willingness to place themselves in harm's way to protect their fellow citizens and brothers and sisters in law enforcement.

