

LAPD

Ten Awarded Medal of Valor

Police Dept. honors ten with its highest medal for bravery in the line of duty.

Stories and photos courtesy LAPD

The LAPD was scheduled to honor 10 of its finest as part the department's Medal of Valor ceremony.

The event was scheduled to be held May 26 at the Grand Ballroom at Hollywood and Highland. LAPD Chief Charlie Beck was scheduled to give out the awards.

This year's honorees:

- Det. Rafael Acosta
- Officer Benjamin Aguilera
- Officer Owen Berger
- Sgt. Dan Gardner

- Det. Daniel Hanabusa
- Officer Custodio Ponce
- Officer Roy Reza
- Officer Rudolph Rivera
- Officer Jose Salazar, and
- Officer Thorsten Timmemans.

The stories of their bravery follow.

The Medal of Valor is the LAPD's highest honor and is awarded to officers who distinguish themselves by conspicuous bravery or heroism above and beyond the normal demands

of police service. To be awarded the Medal of Valor, an officer would have performed an act displaying extreme courage while consciously facing imminent peril.

The medal is awarded by the Board of Police Commissioners and is presented by the Chief of Police in the name of the Department at the annual Medal of Valor awards ceremony. The award consists of a medal, ribbon, and citation. The Medal of Valor was first presented in 1925, and the awards ceremony is made possible thanks to the generosity of the Los Angeles Police Foundation.



**Officer
Custodio Ponce**

■ Gang Suppression

On Feb. 1, 1996, Officer Custodio Ponce and his partner, both assigned to the Hollenbeck CRASH Unit, were on routine patrol for gang suppression. They were on patrol in the Ramona Gardens Housing Project when they saw a male drinking from an open bottle of beer on the street. Officer Ponce's partner recognized the suspect and knew him from a prior contact.

The suspect began to walk away when he noticed the police vehicle approaching. Officer Ponce put the vehicle in reverse and drove past the suspect to tactically position the vehicle in front of the suspect. As the suspect approached the intersection of Murchison Street and Lancaster Avenue, he took out a gun and aimed it at the officers. The suspect ran around the corner and out of view.

Immediately Officer Custodio Ponce gave chase, driving the vehicle around the corner into a driveway. The armed suspect continued running when he slipped and fell on the pavement. Believing this would be a great opportunity for them to detain the armed suspect, Officer Ponce stopped and exited the vehicle. He deployed to

the front left fender of the vehicle. The suspect stood, turned toward both officers and began shooting, shattering the window of the front right door. Officer Ponce's partner returned fire at the suspect.

Unbeknownst to Officer Ponce, he did not put the vehicle in park, but instead he had put it in neutral. Officer Ponce's partner began to exit the vehicle when the vehicle started rolling backwards, knocking him to the ground. The suspect continued his attack on the officers by firing at them as he tried to escape. Officer Ponce, with his cover rolling backwards, and the armed suspect simultaneously continuing his attack on both him and his partner, quickly looked for additional cover but was unable to find any.

Officer Ponce, in defense of his life and the life of his partner, returned fire at the suspect as he looked for additional cover. The suspect continued his attack on the officers as Officer Ponce moved to a block wall to reengage the suspect. Both officers fired additional rounds at the suspect. The suspect dropped to his knees and spun around the corner out of the officer's view.

Officer Ponce repeatedly ordered the suspect to the drop his gun. The suspect failed to comply and fired several more rounds. Officer Ponce fired back several rounds at the suspect who dropped the gun and collapsed to the ground.

Officer Ponce's partner put the vehicle in park and put a broadcast call for backup and approached the suspect. Officer Ponce and his partner took the suspect into custody without further incident. The suspect was taken to a nearby hospital where he died.

Officer Ponce was taken to the hospital. He sustained gunshot wounds to his left hip and left leg, above the knee, and received wounds to both hands from glass fragments. The 9-mm bullet had barely missed the spinal cord. Due to the position of the bullet, doctors decided not to remove the bullet from his left hip, and Officer Ponce was released a few days later. After only a month, Officer Ponce returned to full duty.

Officer Custodio Ponce's outstanding teamwork, communication skills and tactical expertise enabled him to prevail during a life-threatening experience.

OFFICER OWEN BERGER, OFFICER THORSTEN TIMMERMANS, SGT. ROY GARDNER

■ 'House of Horrors'

In the early morning hours of Nov. 7, 2007, Officer Owen Berger and Officer Thorsten Timmermans were working Southeast Area patrol. The officers received a radio call of a man with a gun and two hostages inside the location. While responding to the call, they asked for a better description of the suspect but arrived at the scene before they could be given one.

They exited their car and noticed the front of the home was completely dark. At that time they met with Sgt. Roy Gardner, and all three approached the house together.

The officers made their way down the side corridor of the house and into the backyard. They saw that the back door was standing open and three women had exited the house. The officers then identified themselves and approached the women. The women told the officers the suspect was gone and everything was alright. Doing their due diligence, the officers told them they still had to check the house.

Suddenly, one of the women turned and ran back into the house. Officer Berger, fearing for the safety of the woman and disregarding his own, ran into the house after her. Officer Timmermans followed his partner after stopping a second woman from going inside.

Once in the house, Officer Berger saw the woman go through a bedroom and into a hallway.

As he cleared the bedroom and entered the hallway, he now saw the woman in an adjoining hallway with a man holding her. As he confronted the man, he noticed movement down the darkened hallway. Suddenly shots rang out as he came under fire from the suspect who was hiding.

The suspect fired two shots at Officer Berger, one of them hitting him in the right arm and penetrating through it. After being hit, he was able to move into a nearby bathroom for cover.

Sgt. Gardner heard the shots and ran into the bedroom where he fired several rounds at the suspect. Officer Timmermans heard the shots as well but was unable to see the suspect because of a wall separating the bedroom and hallway. He then saw a muzzle flash at the corner of the doorway from the bedroom hallway and realized

the suspect had moved forward and now had a barricaded shooting position. The suspect was now firing toward the bathroom where Officer Berger was.

Fearing for his partner's life, Officer Timmermans fired his weapon through the wall in an attempt to stop the suspect or force his retreat from his position. The suspect did move and began firing back through the wall at Officer Timmermans.

Knowing Officer Berger was hit and despite numerous rounds being fired through the wall at him, Officer Timmermans moved to the doorway in an attempt to locate his partner. Not able to find him, he moved to the backyard.

Moments later, Sgt. Gardner exited the residence with Officer

Berger. All three safely exited the premises, broadcast a help call and a perimeter was established. The suspect was later taken into custody without further incident.

Officer Owen Berger, Officer Thorsten Timmermans, and Sgt. Roy Gardner are commended for their courage under fire, teamwork, and dedication. Their heroism, gallantry, and remarkable resiliency are traits not found in your average individual. It is these qualities and actions that make them worthy of the Department's highest honor.



**Officer
Owen Berger**



**Officer
Thorsten Timmermans**



**Sargeant
Roy Gardner**

**DET. RAFAEL ACOSTA, DET. DANIEL HANABUSA, OFFICER RUDOLPH RIVERA,
OFFICER JOSE SALAZAR, OFFICER BENJAMIN AGUILERA, OFFICER ROY REZA**

■ Search Warrant Shootout



**Detective
Rafael Acosta**



**Detective
Daniel Hanabusa**



**Officer
Rudolph Rivera**



**Officer
Jose Salazar**



**Officer
Benjamin Aguilera**



**Officer
Roy Reza**

This incident put a group of officers in danger in a shootout in a small dark room, never knowing how many armed suspects they were up against or their exact location. Their actions define courage and heroism.

On June 25, 2008, Hollenbeck's Enforcement Detail had been conducting surveillance for three days in preparation for a search warrant. The officers were waiting for the right combination of dangerous street gang members from the Crazy Ass Mexican criminal street gang to assemble at the location that was suspected of manufacturing and selling illegal narcotics including cocaine, crystal methamphetamine and PCP. Police surveillance had observed narcotics sales activity. Longtime gang members had been very active in the location, so the surveillance team called to have the search warrant served that afternoon.

Det. Rafael Acosta, Det. Daniel Hanabusa, Officer Rudolph Rivera, Officer Jose Salazar, Officer Benjamin Aguilera and Officer Roy Reza, along with seven other officers, assembled and planned to serve the search warrant.

The Narcotics Unit had studied the location and suspects' actions to the finest details. The plan covered every detail and included the use of a rented bobtail truck to conceal their approach to the location. Each officer's individual role and activity during the service of the search warrant was planned. The entry team was very well aware of the dangers of confronting members from this particular gang.

The officers put on their gear and climbed into the rear of a rented bobtail truck. The team truck drove slowly into an alley behind the target location, a fortified bungalow with surveillance cameras. At the front of the entry team was Det. Hanabusa, followed by Officer Salazar, followed by Det. Acosta. Next was Officer Aguilera, and the tail was Officer Rivera. When the suspect refused to allow the officers to enter, the door was breached using a tool to break through the door and enter the rear door's threshold. Officer Reza was assigned to stay outside and secure the perimeter of the residence.

The sequence of events unfolded in less than 30 seconds. Each individual officer and the suspect's actions happened simultaneously. The heroism and decisions made by these officers during this intense event came under the most stressful of conditions. With complete disregard for their own safety, each officer displayed the highest form of sacrifice and bravery to protect his fellow brother in law enforcement.

Det. Hanabusa was the first to go through the door that led into a tiny dark kitchen. Immediately and without warning, he came under attack by heavy gunfire. Det. Daniel Hanabusa's ballistic helmet was struck by gunfire just above the right eye, which knocked him to the ground. While on the floor in a seated position, Det. Hanabusa returned fire when a second shot struck him on the left knee.

The suspect, whose exact location the team of officers were unable to determine, was crouched down, hands wrapped around a gun.

Officer Salazar observed the suspect firing his pistol and Det. Hanabusa down on the kitchen

Each officer is recognized for their heroism; unwavering bravery in the line of fire; quick reaction; and making sound decisions that saved lives and avoided other injuries.

floor. Officer Salazar walked toward the suspect holding his service pistol, firing six to seven rounds at the suspect from a decreasing distance. Det. Hanabusa yelled, "I'm hit, I'm hit." When Officer Salazar saw that Det. Hanabusa was shot and unable to move, he kicked into rescue mode. Det. Acosta entered the tiny kitchen and heard Officer Salazar yell, "Officer down." Officer Salazar reached down and grabbed Det. Hanabusa by the back of the vest and shirt collar and began to drag him away from the gunfire. As he pulled him toward the rear door of the dark kitchen, Officer Salazar continued firing at the suspect with his free hand.

Det. Acosta observed the rescue efforts begun by Officer Salazar. Det. Acosta saw muzzle flashes coming from where the suspect stood and fired two to three rounds of cover fire for Officer Salazar and Det. Hanabusa. Realizing Officer Salazar needed assistance pulling Det. Hanabusa out of the narrow kitchen doorway, Det. Acosta

stopped shooting, reached down and pulled Det. Daniel Hanabusa across his position, then fired four more rounds at what he believed to be multiple suspects firing at them.

Officer Aguilera stepped into the kitchen as Det. Hanabusa went down. Officer Aguilera observed muzzle flashes and felt rounds coming by him. Although he was unable to see the suspect, Officer Aguilera fired one single round of cover fire as Det. Hanabusa was dragged through the dark kitchen. Officer Aguilera backed out of the doorway to make room for Officer Salazar and Det. Hanabusa.

After Officer Acosta exited the kitchen, Officer Rivera observed the armed suspect in the kitchen doorway, firing his pistol at the officers as they were exiting the location. Officer Rivera, in defense of the lives of his partners and of his own life, moved towards the gunfire and fired at the suspect a total of three times. He then moved toward the rear of the location to an area of cover.

When he heard the exchange of gunfire, Officer Reza immediately put out an "officer needs help" call over the radio. When he heard Det. Hanabusa yell he had been shot, Officer Reza left his position of cover and crawled along the perimeter of the outside kitchen wall, past the bullets being fired over his head to reach the wounded detective and pull him out of the kitchen into an alley outside the location.

At the rear of the location, the officers began to render aid to Det. Hanabusa until a rescue ambulance arrived to treat and transport him to a local hospital. Det. Hanabusa sustained a single gunshot wound to his left knee.

The armed suspect took his own life with a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. The investigation revealed the suspect had fired a total of eight rounds from his .45 caliber pistol. He had also sustained multiple non-life-threatening gunshot wounds to his left hip and left ankle. A second suspect inside the residence surrendered to police officer shortly after the shooting ended.

Each officer is recognized for their heroism; unwavering bravery in the line of fire; quick reaction; and making sound decisions that saved lives and avoided other injuries. Each officer responded like the highly trained professionals they are to ensure the public's safety. Each officer also displayed sound tactics and communications skills that resulted in a team effort to extract a wounded officer.



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