

SUNDAY Press-Telegram

SERVING THE SOUTHLAND

December 2, 1991

Lynwood deputies' group adopts gang traits

Hand signs, harassment of supervisors alleged

By Sabrina Steate
Staff writer

LYNWOOD — A sizable group of deputies in the Lynwood Sheriff's Station has taken on characteristics of a street gang, and their harassing activities within the department have led their commander to label them a "malignancy" that must be dealt with quickly.

While cliques within law enforcement agencies are common, particularly among officers who are drawn

together because they patrol high crime areas or work the riskier late night shifts, a 10-week investigation by the Press-Telegram found that problems created by the Lynwood Sheriff's Station group — known as Vikings — appear to go beyond innocent socializing. Their activities range from flashing street-gang-like hand signs to



The Viking logo, no longer officially used by the Lynwood Sheriff's Station, was once its mascot.

opraying graffiti to harassment of supervisors. "The Vikings are in a war against (their) supervisors and the street gang. There's been a breaking down of standards," said one deputy, who spoke on the condition that his name not be used because it could hurt his ability to do his job. Other law enforcement

sources in this story requested anonymity on the same grounds. "It's a case of the inmates running the asylum, with LVS26 (a term some Vikings use to refer to themselves) as an occupying army," the deputy said. "The whole thing is depressing. I hope to conquer it," said Capt. Bert Cueva, commander of the station, which covers 76 square miles in the Lynwood area — a territory with 14,000 gang members and the highest murder rate of any sheriff's station in the county.

But the supervisor for the sheriff's region that includes Lynwood, Chief Duane Preimbsberger, does not consider the Vikings to be anything more than an association of deputies who work and socialize together. "What I'm trying to do is get a clear definition of the problem," he said. "I am not satisfied I have."

When asked what would satisfy him, he responded: "The results of a formal investigation," which he said he didn't feel was necessary at this time. Sheriff Sherman Block was out of town last week and unavailable for an interview, a spokesman said.

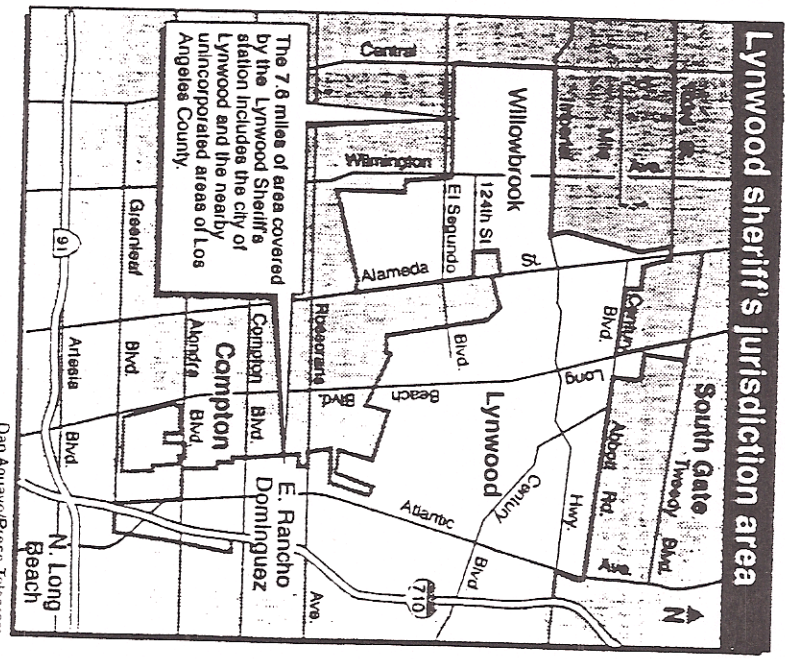
According to 12 law enforcement sources inside and outside the Sheriff's

PLEASE TURN TO VIKINGS/A5

VIKINGS: Hand signs, graffiti alleged



An unidentified sheriff's deputy flashes an "L" hand sign as he is videotaped by civilians in Lynwood.



station bathroom, a former Lynwood deputy was fired after shooting a pregnant woman, and in 1984 a deputy killed himself in the station's locker room.

ired of supervisors

By the spring of 1989, according to one deputy, the Vikings were adopting street-gang-like rituals and jargon that had been publicized in news reports and movies like "Colors." They began referring to themselves as LVS25, which stands for Lynwood Varrto Sheriffs (Station) 25. Latino gangs commonly use Varrto to name their gangs, such as CVS for Compton Varrto Segundo. Twenty-five is the station number for Lynwood.

Were it not for the alleged misconduct, groups such as these could be passed off as simply a law enforcement social clique. In fact, four sources said the term "brotherhood" could describe Vikings.

"We go bowling, fishing, drinking. But it's the neighborhood, the environment, what we're up against that makes us Vikings," said the deputy who identified himself as a Viking.

"You have to have a strong ID out there because of the minority element," he said. "We're always going to gang calls. It's like a war between the (deputies in) tan and green and gangs. You hang together or you're hung out alone."

In Lynwood, Cueva acknowledged, "the hatred of supervisors has been passed from generation to generation" of deputies.

The Vikings bragged about running one sergeant out of the Lynwood station last year, according to the deputy who identified himself as a Viking.

"The supervisor was called 'Mr. Why Man' because he was always questioning their conduct, the source said.

"We stole his property, took his Vietnam jacket with all his medals on it, shot it up and then put it back on his chair. We poured coffee in his flies. We ran him out of here," said the deputy who identified himself as a Viking. Two other deputies confirmed the harassment but denied that the jacket was mutilated.

"They (messed) with his vehicle on a nightly basis," according to another deputy. "It goes by levels — they let the air out of the tires, then cut the tires, then dings on the paint. They tied dead animals up under the frame so they would stink. They put dog s—t on the engine so it would stink."

That supervisor would not comment on the matter. He has been temporarily assigned to a post outside the station for more than a year, Cueva said.

In a 1985 criminal case against one ex-Lynwood deputy, former Lynwood Lt. Walker Force testified that he and other

Chief Duane Premsberger Wants clear idea of problem



top Lynwood officers were the targets of repeated misdeeds he attributed to deputies.

Force said he received a Valentine's Day gift containing a dead rat, had the fender kicked off his car and received prank calls. He testified that two deputies tried to run him down in their car. In a separate police report, Force said that two hearses were dispatched to his house at 3 one morning, upsetting his family.

Force also said the captain of the Lynwood station at the time, Capt. Nick Popovich, had obscene phrases spray painted on his parking stall. And another supervisor had soap dumped into his locker, the lieutenant said.

The criminal case in which Force testified centered on an illegal computer entry falsely reporting that Force's personal car had been stolen and that the driver was "armed and dangerous," according to the court file.

The deputy who was criminally charged with making the false entry, Kathy Kay, was acquitted after a 10-day trial.

Gang signs, jargon

Viking deputies have also adopted street-gang-like hand signs and jargon on the street and among each other, according to photographic evidence and two deputy sources.

A videotape shot in January by a street-gang member showed a Lynwood deputy flashing an "L" hand sign at the gang members before stopping and frisking them. "That's for Lynwood," the deputy says in the videotape. "Lynwood sheriffs."

The deputy wore a sheriff's raid jacket-

Among themselves, the Vikings use gang jargon to greet each other, such as "homeboy" or "OG" (for original gangster), according to two deputy sources.

A group of Vikings who worked the early morning shift together called themselves "OGCF," according to three deputies. OGCF originally stood for "Original Gangster Crime Fighter" but later came to mean "Original Gangster Chongo Fighter," they said. Chongo is a Mexican term for monkey, and is a derogatory term used to refer to blacks. Cueva said he interviewed several deputies about OGCF last fall and told them the term was unacceptable.

Breaking up the clique

Conquering Lynwood's deputy clique is easier said than done, the captain said.

After he arrived at the station in June 1989, he decided to phase out the Viking symbol after a citizen called him about a year ago voicing concern about how the Viking symbol was perceived in Lynwood, a mostly minority community. "I saw a division (among the deputies) along racial lines that interested with our team here at the station," he said. "There were certain minority deputies who could not identify with the symbol. We don't have a racial problem among deputies at the station but I was concerned that one could develop."

Cueva removed a large Viking flag that hung in the report writing room and replaced it with a flag showing a triangle symbol with each side representing an area covered by the station. That flag promptly was stolen, leading Cueva to write a two-page memo to the rank and file. The subject? Integrity. But his action may have backfired. "When he banned the Viking flag, the Viking deputies became more recalcitrant," said the deputy who identified himself as a Viking.

For Viking and non-Viking alike, life in the world of the Lynwood station is a pressure cooker. Deputies said they are caught in the middle, facing violence on the streets and a lack of support from their supervisors in the station. One deputy complained most supervisors at the Lynwood station get in the way of their arrests and try to take over field situations that could, and should, be handled by the deputy who is first assigned the call. He also said supervisors don't try to help deputies learn from their mistakes. Representatives from the deputies union have met with station and department administrators often to discuss how to improve working conditions within the facility, union officials said. At a meeting six months ago, "we pointed out the problems with specific supervisors and apparently the suggestions fell on deaf ears," said union vice president Shaun Mathers.

the August 1990 issue of ALADS L... another, the official newspaper of the Association of Los Angeles Deputy Sheriffs, three Lynwood deputies laughingly flash a variety of gang-style hand signs — including an "L," a "V" and a "25" — commonly used among the Vikings, said two sources, including the deputy who identified himself as a Viking.

There were eight deputies in the picture that was taken at the ALADS picnic after Lynwood Station deputies won the tug-of-war contest. Only one of the deputies featured in the photo would comment.

"The '25' is our station identifier. The deputies were saying with their hand sign, 'This is our station. We're proud of it,'" said Deputy Al Martin, who was not flashing hand signs in the picture. The other deputies in the photo did not respond to requests for interviews.

While Cueva said he thought deputies using gang-type hand signs was "extremely objectionable," Chief Preimberger said a variety of hand signs, such as holding up four fingers to signal everything is OK, are used in law enforcement.

A specific sign for deputies is new," said Preimberger. "I have not made up my mind whether it is appropriate or inappropriate."

Grffiti, insignias

The Vikings have also adopted another street gang activity: spray-painting graffiti to mark their "territory," according to five sources. The word "Vikings" and the Viking insignia "LVS25" have appeared on walls and power poles in the Lynwood area, according to three officers from outside departments, and two deputies who confirmed seeing the graffiti this year. The deputy who identified himself as a Viking said Vikings boasted of the painting and said that it was visible until about two months ago.

At this time, the graffiti apparently has been obliterated, and Cueva said he knows of no "Viking" or "LVS25" graffiti currently in the community. He said he heard it had occurred in the "distant past."

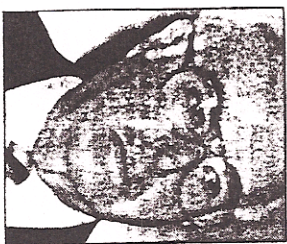
"That may have been a way to let gang members know the deputies were in control," he said. "In principle that's fine," but the application is inappropriate. Cueva said he knows of one instance within the last year where the insignia — LVS25 — was scratched into a horn on the steering wheel of a patrol car. He ordered the horn replaced. Two deputies said LVS25 has been scratched into the trunk of one patrol car and the dash-board of another.

SUNDAY Press-Telegram

December 9, 1990

This edition includes: Long Beach / Carson / Cypress / Hawaiian Gardens / Lakewood / Los Alamitos / Rossmore / San Pedro / Seal Beach / Signal Hill / Wilmington (S)

\$1.50



Sheriff Sherman Block
"Some serious questions"

Sheriff seeks source of booby-trapped gun Investigators probe if deputies, gangs involved

By Sabrina Steele
Staff writer

LOS ANGELES — The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department is investigating whether deputies or street gang members are responsible for sending a booby-trapped gun in a package this fall to a Lynwood Sheriff's

Station sergeant.

Sheriff Sherman Block confirmed the investigation involves those two theories, but he would not go into specifics in an interview Friday afternoon.

In the wake of allegations that a group of deputies at the Lynwood Sheriff's Station have

harassed supervisors and taken on gang characteristics, Block also said Friday the department would look into allegations that similar groups exist at other stations.

While he said he was not aware of the groups, the sheriff said he was "going to have some serious

questions" about them.

"There are some people who need to be dealt with, both at the level of involvement in that (activity) and above that, who may be aware, or should have been aware, that certain things (were going on).

"I'm not going to prejudge. I certainly assure you that I (will) take a very hard look at it," Block said.

The department's review of allegations of misconduct by Lynwood deputies that were published in the Press-Telegram last Sunday is still continuing, Block said.

In the case of the former Lynwood sergeant, a deputy who was stationed at Lynwood until recently said an investigator con-

PLEASE TURN TO GUN/A11

GUN: Sheriff's Department seeks source of booby-trapped weapon

CONTINUED FROM A1

tacted him in November and told him the department was investigating whether deputies were responsible for sending a booby-trapped gun in a package to the supervisor at the end of September.

The deputy and two other sources familiar with the case said late in September the sergeant received a box in the mail that contained a small caliber handgun rigged so that when the box was opened the gun would go off in the face of the person opening the package. The sources said the sergeant called the bomb squad before he opened the box because he had received other death threats in the mail.

The sergeant, according to deputy sources, was unpopular with deputies, and he also had been involved in the shooting of a gang member.

The supervisor has been administratively transferred, sources said. The sergeant would not comment.

Capt. Bert Cueva said he did not want to discuss the matter until the investigation was completed because he was worried about the safety of the sergeant and his family.

Other deputy groups

Sources within the department have told the Press-Telegram that deputy groups similar to the Lynwood group — known as Vikings — have existed as far back as the early 1970s at other stations.

Groups identified by six deputy sources include: the Little Devils at East Los Angeles station in the 1970s; the Cavemen, who are currently at East Los Angeles station; the Grim Reapers at Lennox station; and the Stoney Boys, also known as FPK1 or Stoners, at Firestone station.

It's unclear how active many of these groups are and what the nature of their activities is at the moment. The Cavemen at East Los Angeles Sheriff's Station are a "social group," said the commander of the station.

"None are as radical as the Vikings," said one deputy, who has worked in Lynwood and East Los Angeles stations and has close personal friends who have worked at Lennox and Firestone and told him about the cliques. He asked not to be identified because he felt it would impair his ability to do his job.

Capt. Ramon Sanchez, commander of the East Los Angeles Sheriff's Station, confirmed Saturday the existence of the Cavemen, formed sometime since 1977 and who have been more

active in the last three to five years.

"They are a social group," said Sanchez, who has led the 200-deputy station since April. "They get together off duty, play football, run in the Baker-to-Las Vegas run. They just elected to call themselves Cavemen."

He said he had checked into allegations that members of the Cavemen had tattoos of Cavemen heads on their lower calves with tattoos of flies buzzing around the tattooed head that represented each act of violence the wearer had been involved in. "I heard about it, but found no substantiation," Sanchez said.

Sanchez had no estimate of how many deputies at the station were members.

Sgt. Dan Rosenberg of the Lennox station said in the 18 months he has spent there as dayside watch commander he has heard of the Grim Reapers, but doesn't know of anybody affiliated with the group or any evidence of the group, such as a flag or T-shirts.

"It doesn't appear to be an active club," Rosenberg said. "If it is, it's a very secret-type organization."

The captains from Lennox and Firestone stations could not be reached for comment Saturday.

Some groups probed

Block said a recent investigation of the "Wayside Whiteys," a group of deputies alleged to exist at the Pitchess Honor Rancho in the Santa Clarita area, concluded they don't exist. A federal lawsuit filed earlier this year claimed deputies at the medium security unit of the jail had formed a "semisecret, Ku Klux Klan-type organization." (The facility was formerly the Wayside Honor Rancho.)

Block said Friday he would look into allegations that another deputy group called the Insane Deputy Gang is operating at the separate maximum security facility at the Pitchess Honor Rancho.

Three inmates made sworn statements in November saying they heard deputies at the Pitchess maximum security facility refer to a group of deputies who call themselves the Insane Deputies or Insane Deputy Gang.

The inmates made their statements to investigator David Lynn, who investigated for a lawsuit filed in federal court Sept. 25 that alleges 22 Lynwood deputies engaged in 43 incidents of brutality during a three-month period earlier this year.

Block said the Little Devils at the East Los Angeles station were investigated in the mid-

1970s.

The Little Devils started about the time of the East Los Angeles riots in the early 1970s, Block said. They were not a secret group, he said. They had a roster of members who had tattoos, which "signified a particular time or experience" for the deputy, Block said.

"I never had any indication or allegations that (the group) was ever involved in inappropriate activity," Block said.

Viking clique

The activities of sheriff's deputy cliques became the focus of public attention last week, after the Press-Telegram published the results of a 10-week investigation into the group of deputies at the Lynwood station called the Vikings.

The so-called Viking deputies — who sources said also have tattoos — are alleged to use street-gang-like hand signs, refer to each other as "homeboy" or "original gangster" and spray-paint graffiti.

Harassment of one supervisor last year included tying a dead animal under his vehicle, putting dog feces on his vehicle engine and pouring coffee in his files, two sources said.

After the story was printed, Block said deputies banding together in groups could be a "positive" thing and the deputies' use of their own hand sign is "meaningless." Gang members "get a big kick" out of the fact deputies have their own hand sign, Block said then.

But on Friday he said he had changed his mind about deputies' use of gang-type hand signs. "It is certainly not an illegal act," he said. But "certainly it is unprofessional to a degree. It gives this degree of legitimacy to gang signs, which we all know gangs use to communicate and to oftentimes signify bad things."

"I don't put hand signs in the same category as the allegations of (deputies) spraying graffiti or scratching graffiti into radio car dashboards," he said, adding the department would prosecute a deputy identified as doing graffiti.

Block was adamant Friday in his disapproval of deputy misconduct.

"There's never a right time to do a wrong thing and never a wrong time to do a right thing," he said.

He pointed out that several thousand deputies have gone through the department's career integrity workshops, "where they learn it's OK to be a professional, do a job and not condone or support" improper activities.