

# The Bomb and Arson Unit

by Conrad Grayson

The Bomb and Arson unit of the Sheriff's Department will be 20 years old next year.

Historically speaking, the unit was founded in 1967 by now-retired Inspector Newsome. It was called the fraud/arson unit, and Undersheriff Richard Sandberg was one of its original supervisors.

The bomb disposal side of the unit originated in 1970. The first bomb team was comprised of Sergeant John Reeve and Detectives Dean Browne, Dave Johnson, and the late Carlos Lowe.

This team underwent bomb technician training at the newly formed Hazardous Devices School at the U.S. Army Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, Alabama.

The unit's mission is to identify, recover, render safe, dismantle or dispose of explosives and explosive devices. It also investigates all fires of suspicious nature or which have caused serious injury or death in unincorporated areas of the county.

If this is not enough to keep these guys busy, their secondary mission is to regulate the sale and storage of all explosives throughout San Diego County. Periodically, these officers find themselves crawling down old spider-covered mine shafts and emerging with old cases of dynamite and blasting caps.

The officers also are kept busy providing training sessions to all law enforcement agencies/academies, fire services, and civilian groups in bomb threat and the recognition and handling of explosives and homemade devices.

The present unit comprises one sergeant and four deputies on 24-hour call-out status, seven days a week. The minimum qualifications for the unit is serving two years with detention, two years with patrol, and two years as a detective.

We normally end up drawing officers with 10-plus years experience. Maturity is a key factor in the selection, along with investigative background.

We do not have time to develop this officer into a detective. We have our hands full training the detective into an arson investigator and a bomb technician.

On entering the unit, a new candidate travels to Los Angeles for two solid weeks of training. There he works around the clock



Members of the Sheriff's Bomb and Arson detail, kneeling, from left, Lt. Bill Baxter and Sgt. Conrad Grayson. Standing, from left, Paul Bledsoe, Bill Crigler, Robert (Catfish) Williams and Don Needham.

with L.A.F.D. Arson Strike Force, covering all of Los Angeles, San Pedro, and the valley areas.

The candidate then returns home, kisses the spouse, and it's off to Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, Alabama, for the basic 4-week bomb technician course.

The bomb course is a make-or-break type of training. They find out how nervous or crazy you are. It takes three years to develop

a good court-certified arson investigator. It takes many more years to develop a competent bomb technician.

It is very hard to really explain the feeling one gets in working bomb disposal. It is unlike any other job in law enforcement. We all joke around a lot, but when the call comes in, the joking momentarily stops and it is business.

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The senior investigator is Bill Crigley who is on his 18th year with the department and has just started his eighth year in the unit. Paul Bledsoe came to the unit from Poway detectives and just completed his 15th year on the department and is pushing four years in the unit. Don Needham came to us from Santee sex crimes. He is a 14-year veteran and is on his fourth year with the unit. Our unit rookie is "Catfish" Williams. Catfish worked intelligence for seven years and was regarded as one of the top authorities in outlaw bikers. Catfish is pushing 20 years on the department. He is our unit bulldog; woe the arsonist or bomber who walks into his line of fire!

The unit has been very fortunate during the past six years in receiving safety equipment. Bill Cowling of Dixieline Lumber started it off by buying us our bomb trailer. The county just bought us two complete state-of-the-art bomb suits with separate communications systems.

The Honorary Deputy Sheriffs' Association capped off 1985 by purchasing six complete bomb technician tool kits and a new X-ray with a processor/developer.

The unit has grown in the last 19 years into one of the best equipped, trained, and respected arson/bomb units in the state.

This probably sounds like a recruiting speech, but I am very thankful that I have had the opportunity to watch the unit grow throughout the years and to be part of this very close-knit, specialized unit.