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NEWS

STANDING



GUARD

Story by Elizabeth Eck

For nights on end, Harry Weimer and others in the security team heard gun shots coming from an alleyway next to their posts at a Los Angeles store.

A feud had erupted between gang members of the Crips and Bloods, each claiming ownership of the alley. While most citizens were at home abiding by curfews, gangs cruised deserted city streets between midnight and 4 a.m. The shots rang out with a deafening peal.

Weimer was commanding officer on-site. As he moved his men like chess pieces from

the posts on the outside to the inside to the roof, the questions in his head never stopped.

What's the best defense if they come at us? How can I best place the men to protect the property and themselves? What's our evacuation plan?

It was like being in Vietnam again, said Weimer. It was a war zone.

"I'm not saying you don't get tense. But you're there to do the job and you do it," says the 44 year-old from Riderwood.

The war between the gangs was just one of hundreds of violent outbreaks after the Rodney King verdict in late April. Throughout

the city, fires raged, cars and buildings were ravaged and people were beaten to death.

Weimer was one of nearly 75 tactical officers from the Towson-based Special Response Corp., an emergency security services company called to the wracked city 17 hours after the trouble started, hired to guard two warehouses and two retail stores against looters and destruction.

One client, a major retailer, lost \$5 million in clothing and electronic equipment the night riots exploded.

The last crew of a dozen men finally left the "City of Angels" after being posted there

for a month. For the last couple of weeks on the job, they worked only at night and until security doors could be installed.

In L.A., as on any job, the security specialists are trained not to use excessive force and none are armed, says company president Martin Herman.

"Once you pull that trigger, you can't pull it back," Herman says. "Our presence is a strong deterrent against crime."

"The work is "not for the faint-hearted," he adds.

Nearly 75 guards from the Special Response Corp. traveled to Los Angeles 17 hours after the Rodney King riots started, hired to protect two warehouses and two retail stores against looters and destruction

Crews do carry shields and wear protective gear such as helmets and bulletproof vests—sometimes, as they did in L.A., with metal "heart shields," says Herman. And although guards have suffered lumps and bruises, there has never been a fatality, he adds.

Calls to riot-torn areas are rare, but Special Response guards are summoned year-round, and often with less than 24-hour notice, to help restore or maintain peace in volatile situations like labor negotiations, strikes or during turmoil after a company goes belly up.

The agency also provides anti-terrorist training, dignitary protection and advises companies that want to increase security or protect classified information.

The 32-year-old Herman, a Towson resident, started Special Response in 1986 after 10 years of working his way up in his father's local private security guard firm—Metropolitan Security Co.

With the population growing and cuts to police forces becoming more commonplace, Herman recognized a need for private security services. "The country has grown so much, police can't respond to individualized needs," says Herman. "The public now has to pay more for private security. They are turning to private companies to fill the gap."

His reasons for starting the company were twofold. "It's not the day-to-day monotony of being a security guard. The work is something that gets the adrenaline going and also provides better profit margins," says Herman.

Special Response is one of 10,000 security companies nationwide. A few provide similar services, says Herman, but only his company is strictly an emergency security firm. "The others may fill two special

assignments a year," says Herman. "We never stop. When you go to bed at night, we could be filling a client post."

Working from an office in the 500 block of East Joppa Road, Herman has dispatched security personnel to sites largely on the country's East and West coasts. With a gross of \$3 million annually, clients have paid the corporation from between \$1,400 and \$200,000 per job. Tactical officers are paid between \$600 and \$1,200 a week.

Most of the business comes from word-of-mouth referrals, he says. At the outset, Herman's role is to do the advance work and draw up a "threat analysis plan" in person or by phone. "Plan for the worst and hope for the best," is Herman's motto.

Herman will assess such things as existing security systems, fencing, entrances and exits and what areas might be subject to vandalism. Then he will contact local police to check on their availability and the level of support they can offer.

If guards need to be called in, Herman acts as supervisor in the initial stages, then turns the job over to another commander and later returns to the site when the job is over.

Two weekends ago, Herman was called to a chemical plant in Chattanooga, Tenn. to design a strategy for an expected strike. Within hours of getting the call, Herman met with officials to survey needs.

A dozen years ago, during another labor uprising in the same company, hazardous chemicals were deliberately spilled; officials were afraid it would happen again.

But in this case, the dispute was settled at the last minute before any violent outbreaks.

Settlements occur in nine out of 10 cases, says Herman, and although the situation in Chattanooga was not dangerous, that has not been the case in the past.

Two years ago, guards were hired to work a longshoreman's strike in Staten Island, N.Y. While negotiations went on, guards lived aboard a tug boat where, as soon as the sun went down, they were showered with fire bombs.

A year ago, after a picketer was run over with a car, Special Response personnel were deployed to a foundry in Chambersburg, Pa. to ensure that replacement workers got in and out of work. The heated clash was quelled within two days after tactical officers arrived.

As chief operations coordinator for the jobs in Los Angeles, Herman worked from a communications center in Anaheim, Calif., and didn't sleep from the time he got calls summoning him and his crews to the West Coast at about 5:30 a.m., April 30 until Saturday, May 2.

Most of the pool of 300 guards are former military or police officers and have been trained in defensive tactics or martial arts.

After a thorough recruitment and screening process,

employees are trained in defense, safety, patrol and fire prevention techniques. Herman says they are also trained to take detailed reports, photos and shoot videos as their "defense" against illegal activity. "I love the job and the travel. I like living on the edge," says Weimer who has been with the firm for nearly five years after 15 years on the Baltimore City police force. "You have to have this kind of thing in your blood."

Samuel Cook, a labor lawyer with the firm of Venable, Baetjer & Howard, has employed the tactical officers several times. "It's dangerous work and takes a cool, experienced type of team like those at Special Response to handle the situation with firmness and fairness and not provoke more violence."

Mt. Washington resident Jerry Campbell, 43, a one-year employee of Special Response says the job is exciting and adventurous and "sure beats commuting to work in rush-hour traffic and sitting behind a desk all day."

Campbell, formerly a public information specialist with the U.S. Navy and a National Guard unit in Delaware, says the job sometimes gets tedious when the threat level dies down. "It's like someone once said about war, 'hours of boredom followed by sheer terror,'" says Campbell.

That was the case one night while Campbell and the others were in Los Angeles. The streets were empty and the deadening silence except for the sporadic blare of sirens created an eerie atmosphere, Campbell says.

His crew got reports that a white pickup full of Korean gang members and armed with automatic weapons, were cruising the area.

Moments later, Campbell and the others spotted the truck moving slowly toward them. "Everybody had their bush or pillar picked out to take cover," says Campbell. "We can handle ourselves in a one-to-one, but in the event of gunfire, you're going to duck."

The truck circled around, pulled over into a darkened side street and idled there for five minutes. Finally, it passes by without incident.

"That was an intense moment" he says.

