

**S**he stood motionless staring at the single-story gray brick building occupying the southwest corner of Nadeau Street and Compton Boulevard. She was a recent captain of the facility, and with a certain amount of self-satisfaction, personally acknowledged the closing of the legendary Firestone Sheriff's Station.

One year prior to this event, a training officer was walking briskly down a hallway. Close behind followed a young Los Angeles County Sheriff's Deputy, one month into his six-month training period. As they travelled along, the trainee could see a white mist floating slowly toward them. The deputies continued forward, the trainee noting that his senior partner had observed the apparition but appeared unnerved by the vision. Upon passing the mist, the trainee could see his training officer smile then say, "Hi Gary, how you doing?"

The trainee, shadowing his partner, was puzzled by this encounter. He inquired of the training officer wanting to know what he had seen. The training officer stopped, turned to the younger deputy clearly stating, "That was Gary Saunders, a Firestone deputy killed in 1971 chasing a dirt-bag named Trinidad Iglesias." "How did you know it was him?" asked the trainee, "I couldn't see his face." "When you believe, you'll see all their faces" the veteran replied. He added "You have to believe in us; our tradition; our history; our commitment to each other; our obligation to protect the good people of the community; our unwavering pursuit of criminals; our resolve to attain the highest level of professionalism and police effectiveness. When you believe in these things, you'll see their faces. Those who laid down their lives to make this a better place to live." The trainee remained quiet, looking confused, but inside himself a spark of understanding and the sea of knowledge.

In December of 1982 I arrived at Firestone station, eagerly anticipating the challenge, but wary of the impending training period I was about to face. I had come to Firestone not by happenstance, but by design. I was employed by another agency and had been given the counsel "you have to work Firestone, it's the last frontier." I applied with LASD with the specific intent to patrol the "Stone."

On my first day, I quickly realized that this ugly gray structure housed more than individuals working a job. They were hard-working, dedicated professionals united toward a common goal.

The history of Firestone dates back to the early twenties, designated as the number one patrol station. Through the years, it has recorded various events including, but not limited to, the 1965 and 1991 Los Angeles Riots. The station's personnel have been etched in history. Once a patrol area considered the most violent and dangerous in Los Angeles County, Firestone has logged more deputies killed in the line of duty than any other station. I remember seeing a plaque hanging reverently in the briefing room of Firestone Station. I thought about the men whose names were displayed there and the sacrifice they made. Upon making training officer, I required each of my trainees to memorize the names of their fallen comrades. They deserved to be remembered.

In addition to Don Gillis - 1958; William White - 1964; Ronald Ludlow - 1965; James Waygood - 1967; Lou Wallace - 1970; Gary Saunders -

1971; David Holgun - 1984; and Nelson Yamamoto - 1992; there have been other Firestone alumni who have passed before us attempting to preserve law and order. George Bartaol (SEB) ambushed in the Nickerson Gardens; George Arthur (Central Jail) ambushed leaving work; James McSweeney (my training officer) killed in a helicopter crash while assigned to Narco, patrolling the U.S./Mexico border.

A sign above the rear door at the station proudly announces, "Through these doors pass the finest law enforcement officers in the world." Some might challenge this quote and I would agree in that there are many quality cops at each of our stations. In support, I state that after working three departments and four stations on this department, I was extremely impressed with the level of personnel assigned to Firestone. Possibly the finest cadre of street cops I have ever witnessed. Unfortunately, time and print prohibit the listing of those individuals both past and present.

A testimony to Firestone's style of work would best be explained in a phone call I received one night while working the desk at Firestone. An elderly lady called requesting a patrol unit to advise local gang members harassing her. I informed her that she resided in LAPD's area and would have to call them for assistance. Her reply was, "I know deputy, but I'm real afraid and you know those blue suits won't do anything. If you send a couple of 'Stonies' up here, they'll handle those gangsters." It broke my heart to refuse her, knowing that she was right, we would have handled it.

Another indicator of Firestone's reputation was commonly evident when monitoring outside agency

### **FIRESTONE'S FINEST OFFICERS**

pursuits. suspects would map their route around the Firestone boundaries, for entry into the "Stone" met with unique and stunning results. Suspects violating the boundaries when captured apologetically explained that they entered the "Stone" by mistake.

The exploits of Firestone deputies live in history and could easily rival fictitious heroic cops conjured up in Joseph Wambaugh's novels. Those who knew and loved the "Stone" will truly miss it. Those who may miss it the most are the people who probably never realized what they had; the decent people of the Community. They were provided service and protection through traditions and remarkable styles of training. A degree of service and protection that money can't buy, management can't enforce, and S.O.P.

won't inspire. Many of our managers have tried in vain to break the spirit of #1. Consequently, the residual effect was a reduction in our ability to help the people we were sworn to protect.

My years at Firestone were the fondest of my career. I had the opportunity to sit in a radio car next to my heroes. It was a dream come true.

Five months had passed and the young trainee was close to ending his training period. He had just completed his tour of duty and had decided to pound some iron. He began his decent down the stairwell leading to the basement which contained the weight area. He turned the corner of the stairwell when he saw a white fog ascending toward him. The trainee continued down the stairs and noted that he could see a uniform with a shining gold star within the image. Proceeding on he could now make out the face of a young Asian deputy. As they passed, the trainee said, "Hi Nelson" and the ghost smiled and winked.

Still walking down the steps, the young trainee didn't look back. he didn't have to, he knew he would see the face again. He would see all their faces. He reached the basement and sat deliberately on a weight bench. Tears filled his eyes and rolled slowly down his cheeks. He sat there unashamed, not wiping the tears from his face, for they were tears of pride.

As the young trainee sat quietly in the basement, he heard footsteps coming down the stairwell, he looked up seeing the captain and noted that she as passing the mist. Surprised, he realized that the captain had obviously not seen the face and was unaware of its presence. You never saw their faces did you Captain Freeman? But then again, you never believed!