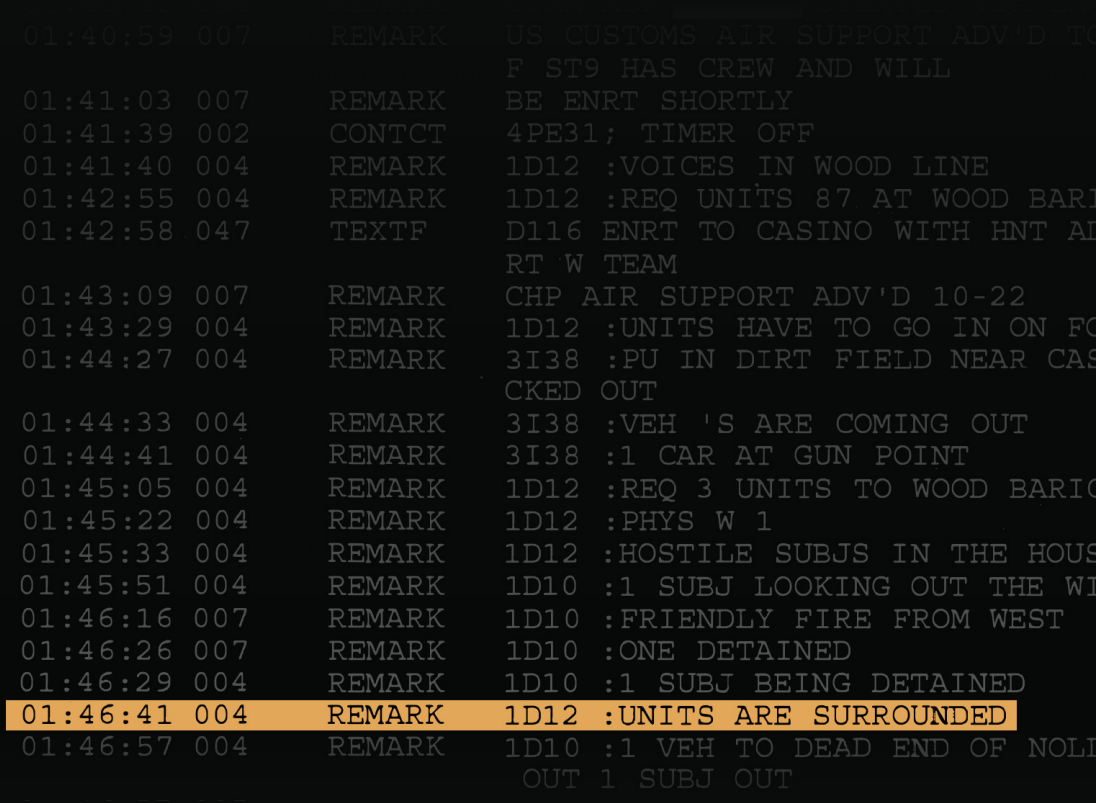
5 SHOOTINGS IN 5 MONTHS · RIVERSIDE COUNTY, CALIFORNIA



UNITS ARE SURROUNDED

Gunfights, Politics, and the Soboba Reservation

RAY DIETRICH

A FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT

BEFORE YOU READ THIS

This is a work of nonfiction. Nothing in it was invented for effect.

Two rules governed the names, and they point in opposite directions on purpose.

Law enforcement is protected. Every officer and deputy in this book, at every rank and from every agency, has been given a different name — my partners, my supervisors, the captains and lieutenants whose decisions I criticize hardest, the investigators who handled my shootings, the men who came when we called and the men who did not.

The dead and the charged are not protected, because they cannot be. The men who were shot, the men who shot at us, and the tribal officials whose decisions shaped what happened appear under their real names. Those names are already in homicide files, in the District Attorney's reviews, in court records, and in the newspapers, and they have been for years.

That is the line: badge or no badge.

The account is built from three things: what I saw and did, written as I remember it; the official reports, transcribed statements, dispatch recordings, and forensic findings that exist for these incidents; and, in a few places, the news reporting from the time. Where my memory and a document disagree, I say so on the page rather than quietly taking the version that flatters me.

What follows is how the book begins.

THE NIGHT EVERYTHING BROKE LOOSE

SOBOBA RESERVATION — MAY 7–8, 2008

I'd just finished months of training new deputies. First night back solo, and you feel that immediately. No trainee in the seat means no babysitting, no second-guessing whether the guy next to you is going to freeze at the wrong moment. You move faster. You think cleaner. You link up with people you actually trust.

That night I found three of them — POP team guys I'd worked with before. Problem-Oriented Policing. They ran stealth Crown Vics, wore BDUs and raid vests, and stayed off the regular call load unless they had to. Magnets for the kind of work that ends careers or ends lives, sometimes both.

Vance was overweight and thought he was the smartest man in any room. He wasn't wrong about the smart part, but when rounds started flying he was the one you kept track of for the wrong reasons. Rossi was thin, sharp, the deputy who'd taught me to write search warrants when most guys on patrol were still struggling with basic reports. Whitlock was a former Marine — tall, aggressive, the kind of deputy who chased suspects to the edge of the earth and somehow ran informants like a twenty-year narc.

We hit a parole search on a regular around 2200 hours — a career dirtbag in Valle Vista with search terms. Every time we kicked his door we either arrested him or walked away knowing something useful. Clean hit, clean exit. By 2330 hours we were done.

That's when we heard it.

Automatic gunfire, drifting across the dry riverbed from the direction of Soboba Reservation. The rez always had noise at night — someone drunk, someone high, someone celebrating nothing in particular with a firearm. But this was different. The rate of fire. The direction. Something in it made all four of us stop talking at the same time.

The POP team drove toward it.

As they pulled up Poppet Flats Road, they saw a bonfire burning in front of a residence — several males standing around it, lit orange against the dark. When the car passed the house, gunfire erupted again. Close. Directed at them.

They backed out and called for help.

I was already rolling. So was our Sergeant, Halloran — big guy, ex-football player, one of the best supervisors I'd worked under at Hemet. He ran his shift like the lives on it mattered, which wasn't something you could say about all of them.

By the time we staged, there were nine of us. A lot for Hemet graveyard. The air felt wrong in that specific way it does before something goes sideways — not a sound, not a fact, just a pressure you learn to read after enough years in the field.

We gathered in the dark and drew the plan in the dirt. Literally — stick, ground, a rough diagram that looked like a play call at a backyard game. Simple. Direct. Fast. Me, Doyle, and his trainee Salas would go in on foot from one direction, park at the wooden barricades, and push toward the bonfire house on the ground. The larger element — Halloran and the POP team, six deputies — would approach through the wash in vehicles.

Doyle was a solid FTO. Reliable in a fight, which is not a given. Salas was new but squared away, carrying a shotgun. I had my AR-15 and three extra mags strapped to my leg.

We parked at midnight and went in on foot.

Past the first barricade. Past the second.

Then: automatic fire. Fifteen to twenty-five rounds, close enough that the sound had weight to it. Not noise — presence.

Rossi's voice hit the radio hard: "11-99!"

Deputy needs help. Every unit in range went Code 3.

We sprinted to a pair of large dumpsters roughly 100 yards from the bonfire house and got low. They weren't cover — rounds would've punched through without much effort — but they gave us concealment and a firing position. Behind us, a school behind chain-link. To our left, a residence we'd had bad contacts with before. Ahead, the bonfire house. To the right, a dirt road running into black nothing.

We were backlit from the school yard. Bad position. No good options. Sirens were getting louder but nobody was reaching us.

From the wash, Vance would later say the incoming rounds were close enough he could feel the shockwave. Rossi said one hit within twenty feet of their position. Meanwhile I was watching two silhouettes move up the dirt road toward us — they jogged briefly, then melted into the dark. I had the rifle up but couldn't confirm weapons, and lighting up my position would've been the last thing I did.

The second barrage came. More rifle fire, directed at the wash team. Whitlock and Rossi returned rounds. Sporadic shots scattered across the reservation after that — yelling, what sounded like war cries, the rez fully awake now and moving.

Twenty, thirty minutes of that. Then I saw them again.

Three men this time, walking side by side up the road, coming straight toward us. They had no idea we were there. I whispered to Doyle and Salas, kept the rifle up, watched the distance close. Forty yards. Thirty. They were laughing — talking loud, loose, celebrating whatever had just happened with the deputies in the wash.

At thirty to forty feet I could make out the first man clearly.

He had a rifle hanging at his side.

I was prone in the dirt. If they walked another ten steps we'd practically be face to face. If he saw me and came up with that rifle before I could move, I was dead. No scenario where that ends differently.

He saw me.

He stopped. Turned his body toward me. The rifle started to come up.

Doyle yelled: "Show me your hands!"

He wasn't listening.

I fired. Seven rounds, center mass. I remember the casings hitting the ground louder than the shots themselves — that tunnel that opens up when training takes over and everything peripheral disappears.

Salas fired the shotgun.

The second man raised his rifle. I transitioned and fired again — seven or eight more rounds. He screamed and ran into the treeline.

The third vanished.

Eli Morillo was on the ground. Not moving.

And we were still alone out there.

THAT IS THE FIRST TEN MINUTES.

What follows it is forty-three minutes on a corner with a body twelve feet away, and four units that were asked for, logged, acknowledged, and never sent.

Then sixteen months of being examined by a machine that had no mechanism for asking what the command post was doing.

The book is built out of the case files, the autopsy, the District Attorney's review, both dispatch channels, and the statements — most of which I did not read until eighteen years later, because I was ordered not to talk about it.

About fifty-eight thousand words, four parts.

formerlawmanlive.com/surrounded

RAY DIETRICH · FORMER LAWMAN