

51 – 50 ! ?

Police code for suspects exhibiting unstable behavior due to substance abuse, psychological problems or both.

“I’m gonna kill you” he threatened. “You guys are crazy, get off me or I’ll kill you”. With expletives deleted, that’s what the “51-50 suspect” was screaming. He was frantic, belligerent, violently thrashing. Even though he was only average size, it would take three officers to forcefully detain him, pinning him to the ground. Soon, deputies from the Sheriff’s Office (SO) arrived to transport the man to jail.

From the initial contact, this had been a strange case. A citizen near the beach had stopped an enforcement officer to report a car break-in. What was bizarre about the break-in was that the suspect was still bashing away at the rear hatch of the car when the owner returned. Even when confronted by the driver and two friends, the suspect refused to leave, claiming it was his car! He finally fled the scene although still raving defiantly.

A short time later, another “disturbing the peace” report gave the same physical description as the car break-in suspect. Again, when first contacted, the man had been unusually hostile, refusing to even stop to answer questions. As Lifeguard Chief Pat Vergne approached to ask for identification, the suspect began swearing and took off in full sprint. The chase was on. Howling about police brutality before anyone had touched him, the man scampered over fences and through yards. He broke garden gates, trampled through shrubbery and then tore down an alley on a stolen bike. Pursued by S.O. squad cars, lifeguard trucks and various personnel on foot, the suspect cavorted wildly for over 20 minutes. After running through a drainage ditch he scampered up onto the roof of a building and broke into an office. But by now, the suspect was surrounded. One of the City officers climbed over a flower trestle to corner the suspect, then flushed him down a flight of stairs to where the final struggle began.

No, this wasn’t a TV re-enactment of some urban cop show. This was the beach! And, it wasn’t a late-night scene from any big-city beach. This was Del Mar! Mellow Del Mar, where the surf meets the turf, where the quiet village basks in the sun, where the beachfront real estate costs more than Malibu. And, this was on another slow Sunday in November, when the beach crowds are sparse. The clear lesson? The growing problems of an ever more violent society are spreading to even the most peaceful enclaves, and we had better be ready!

But how does the City of Del Mar Community Services Department, whose primary concern is keeping the beach and ocean safe, prepare for 51-50’s? The same way they prepare for any other emergency. They build an organization based on employees who are multitalented, dedicated and willing to change.

They recruit and train people with wide ranging skills who develop a strong sense of teamwork and pride, who will do what it takes to get the job done.

51 – 50 ! continued.

Law enforcement at the beach is not new. Several years ago, California State Lifeguards became “peace officers”, wearing firearms with their swimming trunks. In Del Mar as in San Diego, full-time staff have been “city officers” with law enforcement responsibilities for some time. What seems to have changed is the frequency and intensity of the law enforcement contacts as the surrounding population and the beach attendance has grown.

A recent article in LEQ, published by the San Diego County District Attorney’s office, discussed the increased incidents of crime at the beach. “It may be a sign of the times that Penal Code section 241b, assaulting a law enforcement officer, was amended to include lifeguards”.

Rick Gould, lifeguard/statistician for the United States Lifeguard Association has done an excellent job of compiling data from a broad spectrum of lifeguard agencies across the country. His work shows national totals of over 618,000 law enforcement warnings, 6,219 citations and 866 arrests in 1998 alone. Have these numbers changed noticeably in the past five years? Comparing contacts per beach attendance, is there a trend towards more lifeguard involvement in law enforcement? Does City of Del Mar data show a similar statistical picture?

As of this writing, the numbers alone from Del Mar are inconclusive. In some cases, statistical categories have been adjusted, regrouped or re-named. This has made it more difficult to precisely track changes and trends. Additionally, Del Mar has contracted with the San Diego County Sheriff’s Office (S.O.) for additional law enforcement patrols on the beach. Many contacts that previously were noted in the Lifeguard HQ log are now reported in S.O. logs. Regardless of who does the counting, there are definitely more incidents on the beach each year that require misdemeanor citation, detention or arrest. Several of these cases had the potential for escalated violence therefor requiring a call for S.O. back up. Even without precise numbers, it is obvious that crime at the beach in Del Mar is increasing.

Information exchanges with nearby agencies reflect similar situations. In fact, the same individual who had given Del Mar officers such a protracted chase was later arrested in San Diego. It seems he had been brandishing what looked like a revolver near the Mission Beach Lifeguard tower. During his arrest, this suspect again repeated his threat to “kill a lifeguard”. He was later arrested again. This time he was attempting to car-jack a vehicle with a knife. A few weeks later, California State lifeguard supervisors responded to a complaint at Torrey Pines Beach. The suspect fit the description of the 51-50 from Del Mar and San Diego arrests. In this case the charges were indecent sexual exposure. Given the

similarity of the suspect's description, all officers used great caution, anticipating violence. Thankfully, the suspect was not the same person as the other incidents.

Following the incident in San Diego, their Lifeguard Service published a valuable information bulletin with a photo of the 51-50. This bulletin was distributed to other agencies and became the basis for important criminal data accumulation. Frequently, criminals follow an identifiable pattern of behavior that includes choice of location. Inter-agency exchanges can become a key element in combating beach crime by coordinating law enforcement efforts. Not only do beach safety agencies need to continue to guard the beach and the water, they must now also watch their backs.

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