

★ **DEPARTMENT PROFILE**



inset photos: Ed Burns



# SANTA MONICA PD: VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Here's a department with a progressive attitude toward supplying its officers with the training and equipment they need to get the job done.



By Sean P. Egen ■ Photos by Ichiro Nagata



## DEPARTMENT PROFILE

Maybe it's due to the laid-back vibe this beach community gives off, but there's definitely something different about the way the police department of Santa Monica, Calif., does business. It's not that it's overly easy-going, although the department is deeply involved in community events and places an emphasis on providing quality service to the city's roughly 90,000 residents. It's more that SMPD, like the city of Santa Monica itself, seems to possess a progressive, do-what-needs-to-be-done-to-be-the-best type of attitude. A vision, if you will.

You can see it in the state-of-the-art weaponry and equipment used by the 220 officers that make up the department. A review of the extensive training every officer receives, as well as the challenging qualifications he or she must meet, makes it even clearer. But should you require further convincing that the Santa Monica Police Department is a visionary law enforcement organization, just peruse its "Year In Review 2006" report (2007 has yet to be printed as of the writing of this article), under the heading "Vision."

Yes, the department actually bothered to put its vision in writing, a sure sign this organization indeed possesses one.

Santa Monica PD's vision is pretty well summed up with this sentence from its 2006 report— especially its philosophy on training and equipping its officers: "We strive to be recognized for our strong service orientation, progressive development of all our human resources and our application of emerging technologies."

This vision statement isn't just a politically correct-sounding string of words like you'll find in a lot of public relations fluff pieces; SMPD practices what it preaches.

"Progressive development" includes the innovative, ongoing training every Santa Monica police officer receives. And the "application of emerging technologies" is evident in the department's squad cars and on the duty belts of its officers— every SMPD patrol car rack is outfitted with a 12 ga. Remington 870 shotgun and a Colt M4 Commando rifle, and every new recruit is



*Patrol officers are issued an AR-15, but the tactical team experiments with a variety of weapons, including this HK G36.*



*An HK416 with a SureFire sound suppressor and an EoTech holographic sight shows that Santa Monica is definitely "switched on" when it comes to their weapons savvy.*





*The issue weapon is an HK USP for patrol and SWAT, although the tactical team is free to improvise.*

issued a .45 or 9mm Heckler & Koch USP duty pistol. (Officers also have the option of purchasing their own pistol in either caliber from a limited number of department-approved manufactures.)

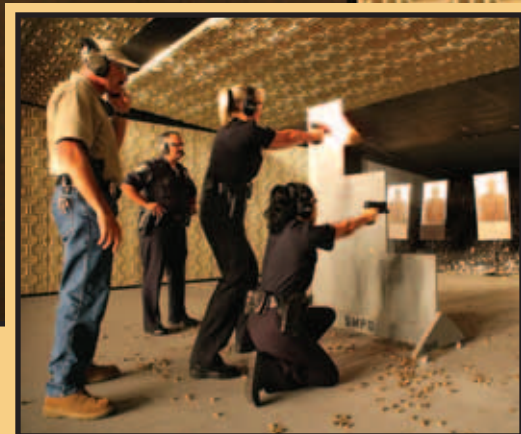
And all of these weapons come standard-issue with SureFire WeaponLights attached: the shotguns and carbines with SureFire dedicated forend lights, the HK USPs with X200s. These lights aren't just for show, either; Santa Monica police officers train and qualify in lowlight conditions. And while every officer has the option to remove the SureFire X200 from the rail of his or her duty pistol, they are strongly encouraged to leave it on.

Because the Santa Monica Police Department also possesses enough vision to recognize that the majority of officer assaults and felonious killings occur during the hours of darkness. (According to FBI statistics, between 1997 and 2006, 46.7 percent of assaults on law enforcement officers, and 42.6 percent of felonious killings, occurred between the hours of 4:01 p.m. and midnight alone.)

"We greatly encourage them [graduating cadets], after they come out of the academy, to keep their X200 on their pistol," says SMPD's Weapons Training Officer Dave Chieruzzi. "Some officers have found out, when they come down to do their qualifications, that it can be difficult to manipulate their weapon during stoppage or malfunction drills [in lowlight conditions] with a flashlight in their hand."



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*Female officers shoot and train with the department's senior firearms instructor, Dave Chieruzzi. They practice different shooting positions for a variety of cover heights here.*



### Low-Light Quals

Santa Monica police officers must qualify in a lowlight environment a minimum of three times a year. There are eight basic annual qualifications: pistol, rifle, and shotgun— each in a lighted and low-light environment— plus backup- and off-duty-gun qualifications.

And Chieruzzi, a 23-year veteran of SMPD, runs them all. Along with developing and facilitating training and qualifications, Chieruzzi's duties also include helping to select new weaponry and equipment for the department, and maintaining the department's weaponry. He's also a member of SMPD's SWAT team, considered collateral duty, but it requires an additional 16 hours of training each

month— plus additional qualifications.

It's a lot of work, but Chieruzzi loves his job, especially considering he enjoys the support of a police department that places a strong emphasis on training and in outfitting its officers with top-notch equipment to do the job right.

Chieruzzi attributes the roots of the department's best-gear-best-training philosophy to the 1997 North Hollywood shootout. During this infamous gunfight, two bank robbers, armed with fully automatic rifles, outgunned local Southern California law enforcement officers for nearly an hour, injuring 17 people before they were finally stopped, both gunmen losing their lives in the battle.

"Prior to this shooting, officers were basically armed with sidearms and 12 gauge shotguns, which

everyone saw was ineffective,” says Chieruzzi. “Our department saw a need to have superior firepower, so they went out and purchased 10 semi-automatic Colt rifles, equipped them with scopes, and trained 10 officers on patrol, who then carried them in their trunks. They were dedicated rifles to those officers.”

Ten officers soon turned into 20, and then, according to Chieruzzi, another shooting near the Los Angeles International Airport in 2000, which resulted in an LAPD officer being killed at close range by an AK-47, prompted Santa Monica PD to take things even further.

“We realized that every officer needed the availability of superior firepower. The administration agreed, so we purchased a number of shorter-barreled Colt rifles that are dedicated to patrol cars.”

The majority of the department’s Colt rifles are semi-automatic; however, several have full-auto capability. The department also has on hand a number of 5.56mm Heckler & Koch G36 sub-compacts, which only come in full-auto.

“We train in full-auto mode, but we generally don’t



*Regular qualifying includes square range work...*

use it— full auto is not really applicable to an urban police force environment,” says Chieruzzi, alluding to the fact that police officers must account for every single round they fire.

However, before any new officers get their hands on any of these weapons, they first have a date with Weapons Training Officer Chieruzzi. After completing six months of academy training at the Orange County



*... as well as low light and shooting on the move.*

Sheriff’s Academy, every SMPD graduating cadet spends 16 hours with Chieruzzi, where he works with them to reinforce and perfect their pistol and shotgun skills and gives them an introduction to the Colt rifle.

Of course, that’s just the beginning. They, like every other Santa Monica police officer, will receive ongoing training and be required to complete each of the grueling mandatory qualifications.

## Range Facilities

Just a few blocks from the Pacific Ocean, the modern Santa Monica Police Department station houses its own state-of-the-art indoor shooting facility. Located in the building’s basement, this underground range features movable targets, controllable lighting, soundproofing, and two feet of rubber (made from ground-up automobile tires) piled against the far wall to catch the frangible (no lead) projectiles from the clean ammo the department uses down here.

Against the near wall is a large bank of Colt rifles, each outfitted with a SureFire M500 Series dedicated forend WeaponLight. These rifles are used strictly for training; they’ll never hit the streets.

This modern facility can accommodate exercises at ranges up to 25 yards, and its easily controllable environment allows light levels to be manipulated and “stress” to be induced, a word that causes Chieruzzi’s mouth to form a sadistic smirk.

“Trust me,” he says, “when they get in there, the times are nothing they can sit back and relax on.”

The times to which Chieruzzi refers are part, along with accuracy, of the minimum performance standards

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*K-9 teams back up patrol and the SWAT unit.*

he's developed for each qualification. In yet another progressive step, SMPD has moved away from bullseye qualifications and made the emphasis about placing accurate shots in a silhouette target, in a designated amount of time.

These times are set by Chieruzzi, who determines them by taking several officers of varying skill levels and running them through the drills. He then compares their times and calculates a reasonable average, establishing a minimum performance standard for each qualification. Chieruzzi even tests himself on these standards, to make sure they're fair.

The drills include accelerated pairs, reloads, stop-page/malfunction drills, shooting from the low-ready position, and drawing from the holster and firing, just to name a few— all in lighted and lowlight environments. And if even one round hits outside the silhouette target during qualifying, an officer must redo that particular qualification. So, in essence, Santa Monica Police Department's qualifications are 100 percent.

"Any half-reputable arms instructor can teach

someone to shoot a bullseye target," says Chieruzzi. "But when you induce stress, the scores go down. In law enforcement, we're accountable for every round we discharge, so if we miss, we're accountable for where that round goes. Do you really want an officer out there who can only shoot 70 percent?"

For longer-range training, the department leases an outdoor facility in Santa Clarita, Calif., approximately 35

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“Given the incidences of hearing loss with law enforcement professionals, other weapons could wind up suppressed in the future.”

miles north of Santa Monica. Having two facilities at its disposal gives the department the capability to train at a variety of distances and in different environments, to set up a multitude of training scenarios and situations, and to conduct Simunitions (non-lethal cartridges that fire colorful wax bullets) training. It also affords Chieruzzi the luxury of separating training from qualifying, something the man firmly believes in.

“There have been times where officers have trained for five hours in the hot sun and then been expected to perform at 110 percent after that,” says Chieruzzi. “They’re spent, and they’re tired. So I’ve separated the two. All of the qualifications are done down here. So when we go out for eight-hour days, that’s nothing but training.”

Concentrating entirely on training, without having to worry about qualifications the same day, allows Santa Monica officers to focus more intently on the lesson at hand, which, in theory anyway, gives the training a

better chance to sink in. And, as SMPD Investigator Chris Dawson learned firsthand, all training, even exercises that don’t seem terribly relevant at the time, could one day play a critical role in an officer’s performance of his or her duty.

## 100 Yards With A USP

On April 9, 2001, while off duty, Dawson was involved in an incident that required him to subdue a shooter armed with a .357 Magnum at an extended range. The suspect had already fired several rounds inside a local Airborne Express building, and one round outside, and was walking calmly down the street, gun in hand.

Unable to get a clear closer-range shot because of the number of bystanders, Dawson was faced with the prospect of the suspect disappearing down a nearby alley and getting away. That’s when he drew upon his training to make an impressive 219-foot shot with his HK USP, hitting the suspect in the thigh, incapacitating

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him, and allowing him to be taken into custody without further incident.

“I was able to make such a shot because I’d recently received training in lobbing rounds at targets on a hillside,” says Investigator Dawson. “At the time, it was something I thought I’d never have to use.” But, as Dawson is the first to admit, it was his

*The department issues Colts but is looking closely at the HK 416.*

training that gave him the confidence to even attempt such a shot on that day.

## Weapons Training

As the department’s weapons trainer, Chieruzzi is constantly researching outside training courses and new equipment. “Part of my job is, I guess it’d be called research and development. I look for the bigger, better mousetrap,” he elaborates.

When he can, Chieruzzi attends training courses sponsored by other departments and organizations. While there, he picks the trainers’ brains, then figures out, when applicable, ways to incorporate the training he’s received into his own courses.

But with qualifications alone eating up eight months of his year, that doesn’t leave Chieruzzi a whole lot of time for research and personal training. Still, he manages to get out when he can. His most recent outing was to SHOT Show, in Las Vegas, where he picked up over 30 pounds of literature and spent some time at the SureFire booth, checking out their new products for 2008. It seems Chieruzzi is a not only a fan of SureFire’s weapon-mounted lights, but of their small, powerful

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flashlights as well.

“When I first came into law enforcement [28 years ago], they were teaching us how to operate a full-sized flashlight with a shotgun, and it was just cumbersome,” Chieruzzi explains. “They didn’t have small, two-cell lights back then. It’s more advantageous to have a light that’s small and ergonomically designed to be used with a weapon.”

SMPD officers are free to select a primary flashlight of their choice, but Chieruzzi is a firm believer that every officer should also carry at least one backup, preferably a small, powerful, disposable-battery flashlight. He particularly likes the ergonomics of SureFire flashlights featuring a rubber-ringed CombatGrip™, which he feels allows an operator to better manipulate his or her weapon while holding the light.

Ergonomics is high on Chieruzzi’s list in selecting equipment for the



*Santa Monica PD issues the SureFire X200 handgun WeaponLight to every officer.  
The duty weapon is an HK USP.*

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department, which is part of the reason SMPD's weapons are outfitted with SureFire WeaponLights. He appreciates their cleanly integrated, intuitive switching, which allows an operator to activate the light without having to search or fumble for the switch, something no officer can afford to do in a critical situation where seconds count.

But ergonomics isn't the only thing he considers in choosing equipment, especially given that he's the department's armorer and primary gunsmith.

"I'm looking at the manufacturer's reputation, how they back their product and, more and more, ergonomics," Chieruzzi elaborates, "such as pistol grips that will accommodate a variety of different sized hands. I also look for reliability. For example, on a weapon, is it something that's going to take a gunsmith to repair, or does it have factory drop-in parts? That's one reason why the HK USP was selected. Everything is drop-in, no custom fitting. And in the case of the USP, the gun simply doesn't break. The most I've replaced is a couple of mainsprings."

This same reliability and ease-of-maintenance criteria clearly played a role in the selection of the department's sound suppressors as well. Although sound suppressors are not yet standard-issue on the carbines or machine guns used by SMPD officers, the .308 DPMS Panther sniper rifles used by the department's SWAT team come equipped with SureFire FA762SS Fast-Attach® sound suppressors, notoriously reliable and low maintenance.

Of course, as progressive and forward thinking as SMPD is, and given the incidences of hearing loss with law enforcement professionals, other weapons could wind up suppressed in the future.

Especially with SMPD's history of taking a proactive approach. While Chieruzzi typically initiates proposals for new equipment and sends them up the chain of command for consideration, some-

times the initiatives come from above. At least that's how things worked with the department's Taser program, according to Chieruzzi.

"We started our Taser program three or four years ago, with a

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handful of M26 Tasers that officers were trained on and could check out for patrol. Then the X26 came out, and we started training on that and had a few that officers could check out. The chief saw a need that not just a few, but all, officers should have one. So we made a proposal and acquired the funding, and now we're in the process of outfitting every officer in the department with an X26 Taser."

## More Resources, Less Crime?

So, is all of this training and equipment helping the city of Santa Monica to keep its crime statistics down? Unfortunately, it's no easy task, if not impossible, to draw a direct correlation between the two—especially given the city's complex and constantly changing character.

Santa Monica is the terminus of Interstate 10, which starts in Jacksonville, Fla., and runs through eight states and dozens of towns, so the city gets a huge influx of visitors (and dreamers coming to California to seek their fame and fortune) each year.

The Santa Monica Pier, the surrounding beaches, and the Third Street Promenade are all major attractions for local Southern Californians as well. And, like many beach cities in California, Santa Monica has a large homeless population and experiences a fair amount of gang activity, especially spillover from surrounding communities. All of these factors contribute to making Santa Monica a unique community to police.

That said, the city's UCR (Uniform Crime Reporting) totals decreased by 4 percent from 2005 to 2006 (again, 2007 stats are not yet available as of this writing). Was any of that decrease due to the department's progressive philosophy toward training or outfitting its officers with the best equipment?

Who can really say? But one thing's for certain—quality training and the best gear aren't going to make Santa Monica police officers any less prepared or effective in the performance of their duties.

Besides, if you ever hope to see results, you've got to have vision. And SMPD definitely has an



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