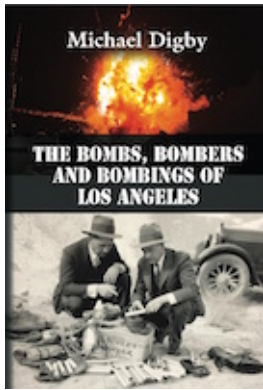


Michael Digby

**THE BOMBS, BOMBERS
AND BOMBINGS OF
LOS ANGELES**





It may be hard to imagine that there was ever a time in American history when terrorist and criminal bombings were as commonplace as today's random acts of gang violence. For more than a century, long before the words 'Al Qaeda' or 'ISIS' ever became part of our national media lexicon, bombing incidents have played a significant part in American crime annals, including right here in Los Angeles.

Car and truck bombs, suicide bombers, train and airplane bombings, gangster bombers, lunatic bombers and committed terrorists and extremist bombers. There were big bombs and little bombs.

For much of the Twentieth Century all that stood between outright anarchy and order were the policemen, detectives, intelligence specialists and bomb disposal officers who faced down the bombs and bombers alike. Sadly, much of their

work is largely forgotten.

This is the story of just a few of those bombings. Presented as well-researched case studies, the author, himself a veteran detective and bomb technician, offers a look at just a few of the many bombs, bombers and bombings that have plagued the Los Angeles area for nearly a hundred years.

The Bomb, Bombers, and Bombings of Los Angeles

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**THE
BOMBS, BOMBERS AND
BOMBINGS
OF
LOS ANGELES**

MIKE DIGBY

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Table of Contents

Foreword	ix
Introduction	1
SECTION 1: THE DYNAMITERS	9
CHAPTER 1: THE “FOUNTAINER” SUICIDE BOMBING	11
CHAPTER 2: THE “HUMAN BOMB” AT CENTRAL STATION.....	26
CHAPTER 3: THE BELL AVENUE BOMBER	39
CHAPTER 4: THE NOT-SO-SUPER SNOOPERS.....	43
CHAPTER 5: BOMBER BILL’S NIGHT OF REVENGE	59
CHAPTER 6: MY NAME IS CHARLES W. HUNTER	69
CHAPTER 7: 4820 ALCOA AVENUE.....	73
CHAPTER 8: DYNAMITE DAYS	77
SECTION 2: LOSERS, LONERS AND LUNATICS	89
CHAPTER 9: THE DEADBEAT DAD	91
CHAPTER 10: THE LONG BEACH BOMB MAN.....	100
CHAPTER 11: THE ALPHABET BOMBER.....	105
CHAPTER 12: WIGGINS’S DIGGIN’S	119
CHAPTER 13: THE IRANIAN “HIT TEAM” THAT WASN’T	132
CHAPTER 14: UP THE IRS, INC.....	140
CHAPTER 15: BOMBING THE MORNINGLAND CHURCH	155
CHAPTER 16: GUNFIGHT AT THE CALICO MOTEL.....	167
CHAPTER 17: THE SOLDIER OF GOD	177
CHAPTER 18: THE PRICKER	196
CHAPTER 19: UNREQUITED LOVE AND THE CAR BOMBS	205
SECTION 3: THE PIPE BOMBERS	211
CHAPTER 20: GOLDEN JACK BAKERY	213
CHAPTER 21: BOMBING OF THE NAVY CAPTAIN.....	217
CHAPTER 22: EL BOMBER.....	222
CHAPTER 23: MEET THE FAMILY ROSENKRANTZ.....	230
CHAPTER 24: DOREEN AVENUE.....	237
CHAPTER 25: A DEATH ON POWERLINE ROAD.....	246

CHAPTER 26: THE STALKER BOMBER.....	264
CHAPTER 27: DRAMA ON THE POMONA FREEWAY.....	274
CHAPTER 28: MISHAPS, MISCREANTS AND MISFIRES	283
SECTION 4: RADICALS, REVOLUTIONARIES AND EXTREMISTS	301
CHAPTER 30: TROUBLING TIMES AHEAD	303
CHAPTER 31: CUBAN POWER.....	305
CHAPTER 32: THE DOMESTIC RADICALS.....	314
CHAPTER 33: CHICANO LIBERATION FRONT	339
CHAPTER 34: THE ARMENIAN RESISTANCE MOVEMENT	356
CHAPTER 35: CROATIAN LIBERATION ARMY	371
Epilogue	381
Bibliography	383
PRIMARY SOURCES	383
INTERVIEWS	384
SECONDARY SOURCES	385
BOOKS.....	385
Acknowledgments	389

Chapter 10

The Long Beach Bomb Man

January 16, 1967 was the date the lives of a young and troubled heroin addict named Michael Martin Williams and Sergeant John Spiller of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Arson-Explosives Detail would intersect in a most dramatic way.

It all began just before 5:30 AM when the suspicious behavior of three individuals, two males and a female, drew the attention of Long Beach Police Department Officers Chuck Gay and his training officer, Charles W. Clark. The suspicious trio were headed west on Ocean Boulevard in downtown Long Beach in what Officer Clark suspected was a stolen vehicle. That section of downtown was rather seedy, with liquor stores, adult theatres, bars with street activity taking place all night long. The officers stopped the vehicle at the intersection with Cedar Avenue and approached the occupants. It took little time for both officers to determine that all three were residents of the city and, just as the officers had suspected, heroin addicts or, in the parlance of the day, "junkies."

During the vehicle stop, a pellet gun, marijuana and some pills were found in the car. A quick records check revealed that the driver and registered owner of the car, Michael Martin Williams, a twenty-four-year-old who claimed he was a construction worker, had previously been arrested and convicted for theft. As any law enforcement officer then or now will tell you, a heroin addict doesn't possess a pellet gun for any purpose other than using it to commit a robbery. And it certainly didn't help his cause when the officers learned that he had a prior arrest for a weapons violation. With that, the trio was arrested and placed in the back seat of the patrol vehicle. They were driven to the Long Beach Public Safety Building less than a mile away.

Back in 1967, all arrestees were driven into a secured, police only parking garage beneath the building. Officers secured their firearms in the trunk of their patrol cars or in a locked wall locker,

then took their prisoners into a garage level booking area. The actual jail was on the fourth floor.

Typically, the arresting officers would provide the booking supervisor, in this case, Sergeant David Bauer, with a brief description of facts that led them to make an arrest. If the arrest was approved, as it most often was, the officers could book the arrestees, a process that would require a thorough and detailed search of their clothing and bodies, seizure and documentation of personal property and a series of questions meant to elicit the arrestee's personal information. That is what awaited Williams and his two companions. Having gone through the booking process just five months prior, Williams knew exactly what was in store for him and realized that his deadly secret would soon be discovered.

What the officers were unaware of at the moment was that Williams had high explosives wrapped around his waist, concealed under heavy layers of clothing. The trigger to detonate the device lay in his jacket pocket. Potential disaster was close at hand.

As Officer Clark led the handcuffed trio into the booking area, he noticed that Williams, though still compliant, "was acting hinky, like something was up." He noticed that Williams had, "something very bulky around his waist, and like I said, was acting hinky," so even before commencing the formal booking process, he decided to give Williams a quick search. Standing behind him, he reached up under Williams's field jacket and sweater, untucked the white shirt and then reached his hands up under Williams's shirt. It was then that he felt and observed what appeared to be "sixteen feet of Primadet high explosives" wrapped around his waist.

His secret detected, Williams said aloud, "I'm wired and I'll blow up the building."

Officer Clark reacted quickly and pulled Williams out of the booking area and back into the subterranean garage where he told him to face the wall and stand still. Williams complied, not that he had any choice. Sergeant Bauer retrieved a shotgun and followed them both into the garage. Officer Gay sounded the alarm, first alerting the station commander, Captain Maurice Wishon who, in turn, ordered that the building, only sparsely populated at the

moment due to the early hour, be evacuated. The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Arson-Explosives Detail was summoned.

Williams was becoming increasingly incoherent, mumbling to himself, even straining at times to hear and understand the commands shouted to him by Officer Clark and Sergeant Bauer, both of whom kept their weapons trained from a distance. At times, William shouted back that he was wired with dynamite, not that the two officers needed any reminder. Using cover positions from behind parked patrol vehicles, they remained in a tense standoff with Williams. Officer Clark later said, "I'd have dropped him if he tried to make a run for it" but that he'd "have waited to fire until Williams was far enough away from the building."

At that early morning hour, the city was shrouded in a thick layer of fog. The blinking red and amber lights of the patrol cars that blocked access to the only two entrances to the subterranean garage, the nearby street lights and headlights from passing motorists all cast an eerie glow over what was already proving to be a surreal situation. Six civilian police employees gathered in an office building across the street, awaiting the all clear signal.

Seven miles away from the drama that was unfolding beneath the Long Beach Public Safety Building, Sergeant John Spiller of the Arson-Explosives Detail was about to begin his work day.

In his twenty-first year of LASD service, Sergeant Spiller had served as an Explosives Ordnance Disposal (EOD) technician during his four year enlistment in the US Air Force. As a member of the LASD, he had served as both a patrol deputy and detective at Firestone station. In his four years at the Arson-Explosives Detail, he had been called upon to examine and dispose of explosive devices on many occasions. He knew his business. Sergeant Spiller was a man ideally suited for the task that lay ahead.

The telephone call he received at home from sheriff's headquarters was short, informing him "a man with a bomb is being held at gunpoint in the basement of the Long Beach police station." Another Arson-Explosives detective was already en route but would have a longer response time. He had asked that Sergeant Spiller,

whom he knew to live much closer, respond as quickly as possible. Sergeant Spiller made the drive in a few minutes.

Sergeant Spiller descended the ramp, his footsteps echoing through the near-empty subterranean garage. His job was rather straightforward. He planned to engage Williams in conversation, examine the device and then disarm him. And even though established protocols called for two members of the Arson-Explosives Detail to be on scene, Sergeant Spiller felt that the task could not wait. He continued into the garage.

Williams was standing facing the concrete wall. Sergeant Spiller could see Long Beach officers standing some distance away, holding Williams at gunpoint. As Sergeant Spiller got closer, he identified himself and told the still handcuffed Williams that he was there to “take this thing off of you.”

With Sergeant Spiller’s hands exploring Williams’s pockets and reaching up under his shirt, Williams asked, “Do you know what you’re doing?” Sergeant Spiller had never been one to enjoy small talk or sarcasm, especially with a junkie wearing explosives.

He replied, “No,” his way of denying this kid the satisfaction of knowing that everything would be all right.

He continued with the task of removing whatever it was that was concealed under Williams’ clothing. First, the two flashlight batteries in the front jacket pocket of his field jacket were separated. Using his hands to slowly trace wires and bulges, Spiller reached up under Williams’s shirt and felt several feet of high explosive detonation cord wrapped around his torso. Three high explosive blasting caps, the wires exposed, were primed for contact with the flashlight batteries. Sergeant Spiller removed the explosive device and for the moment, was satisfied that that part of the task was complete.

Next, he handed Williams over to Officer Clark, who led him away for booking. It was then that Captain Wishon asked an exhausted and seemingly dejected Williams why he wanted to blow himself and the building up. Williams replied, “I’m tired of being a junkie.”

Sergeant Spiller’s job wasn’t quite done. He carefully examined each item, ensuring that the “render safe” was done appropriately,

then transported them to a military storage area at Fort MacArthur. Later, as part of his expert opinion to the district attorney, he would offer that the detonation cord, blasting caps and batteries were configured in a way capable of creating a high explosive detonation, one that would certainly have caused significant damage to the building, killing anyone within the blast radius.

A followup search of Williams's car resulted in the seizure of two additional blasting caps. Williams never provided a statement to police detectives.

For his actions, Williams received a three year state prison sentence but was granted immediate probation.

Chapter 27

Drama on the Pomona Freeway

For many years, Los Angeles held the rather dubious distinction as the bank robbery capital of North America. At its height, the Los Angeles region logged more than 2600 bank robberies in one year, including a record twenty-eight in just one day. Some experts have offered that it's the misguided notion that the vast Los Angeles freeway system provides an easy escape route or that the availability of firearms, recidivism of bank robbers or even just the sheer number of banking institutions makes bank robbery so appealing. Whatever the cause, in 1999, bank robberies were "off the chart."

Los Angeles has also been the undeniable car chase capital of the world, not a title that makes anyone particularly proud. Many of these chases are a little less dramatic and action-packed than others, ending with either the suspect getting away clean, only to be caught another day or, as is most often the case, the suspect is captured without incident. So, in a city where televised car chases are a common feature of nightly news broadcasts, the combination of a bank robbery and a car chase seems inevitable.

Occasionally, a significant amount of tense and terrifying action captures the attention of television viewers and unhappy freeway travelers alike, as it did on April 21, 1999 on a congested freeway east of Los Angeles.

The dramatic events of that day began at about 11 AM, when a man telephoned the Green Line Cab Company and asked to be picked up at the intersection of Olympic Boulevard and Velasco Avenue near downtown Los Angeles. The cab driver, Roberto Rodriguez, arrived within minutes and picked up his fare, a Hispanic male who was carrying a large black suitcase. He placed the suitcase on the back seat, climbed in next to it and asked to be driven downtown. Two minutes later, the fare produced a handgun and placed the barrel against the side of the Roberto's head.

“Get out,” he said. “I want your car. Don’t call the police.”

At the intersection of 12th and Union Streets, the frightened cab driver pulled to the curb, left the keys in the ignition and left the car. The armed man climbed over the seat and drove away at a high speed. Roberto telephoned the Los Angeles Police Department Rampart division from a pay telephone and reported the theft of his cab. The time was 11:15 AM.

A few minutes before noon, a businessman named Mirhan pulled his car into the parking lot behind the CalFed Bank branch on Florence Avenue in Bell Gardens, southeast of downtown Los Angeles. As a customer of CalFed, it was his practice to stop in at the lunch hour and make a business deposit. There was limited parking available, so he chose a parking space closer to the Sanwa Bank next door. He had just pulled into the space, when he noticed a colorful green and yellow taxi cab with an illuminated plastic dome on the roof pull into a handicapped spot directly behind the CalFed.

What he saw next absolutely terrified him. The driver exited the taxi wearing what appeared to be dark Army clothing. He had a knit mask over his face and carried an assault rifle with a scope. The armed man walked directly into the back door of the CalFed bank, leaving his engine running and the driver’s door wide open. The businessman considered the CalFed employees his friends and knew most of them by name. He was scared for them. He picked up his cell phone and dialed 911.

Like any other business day, employees of the CalFed bank branch at 5740 Florence Avenue, located in the city of Bell Gardens, spent the morning conducting routine bank business. Customers came and went. It was a normal day. All sense of normality ended however at 11:45 AM when a lone man wearing a knitted mask with eyeholes, a ballistic vest and brandishing a rifle that had a scope attached entered the bank and boldly announced, "This is a robbery. Everybody get down.”

Shocked customers and bank employees raised their arms, frozen in fear. Others dropped to the floor in compliance. One bank teller was tossed a green satchel.

“Fill this up,” the gunman ordered. It took seconds for the teller to place the contents of her drawer, about \$3300, in the satchel. The gunman snatched it from her. “The bag is too light. Did you put any money in it?” he shouted. Not waiting for the teller to respond, the armed man, clutching the satchel in one hand and pointing his assault rifle with the other, began running towards the back door of the bank. Another teller triggered a silent alarm that went directly to the Bell Gardens police. The elapsed total time in the bank may have been less than thirty seconds.

Talking on his cellular telephone with dispatchers from the California Highway Patrol was Mirhan, the concerned businessman, now laying low in his driver’s seat. He was startled to see the armed man exit the bank so suddenly. As the taxi pulled away and entered traffic, Mirhan followed, telling the CHP dispatchers the direction of travel taken by the bank robber.

The actual robbery was about the last thing that went well for twenty-five-year-old Armando Rodriguez. A security guard by trade, he had only one minor blemish on his record, a 1994 arrest in Redondo Beach for producing false identification to a law enforcement officer. For that, he was sentenced to two years of probation. He was not under investigation for any crime and not known to be a member of a street gang.

The Bell Gardens Police Department dispatch center first received a panic alarm from the bank, followed by a few telephone calls alerting them to the bank robbery and the suspect’s description. Patrol units were alerted to be on the lookout for the not-so-inconspicuous and brightly-colored taxicab, the one with an illuminated signboard on the roof, the one with an armed man behind the wheel.

The CHP alerted area law enforcement agencies, including Bell Gardens police that a citizen was following a brightly colored taxi that had just been used in a Bell Gardens bank robbery. With Mirhan following safely behind, he relayed every turn the taxicab made, even the speed. Mirhan maintained a distance as best he could and would later say how frightened he was the entire time.

Rodriguez sped along surface streets for less than two miles in the direction of the Santa Ana Freeway, unaware that he was being followed by an observant citizen talking on a cellular telephone to the CHP. One will never know exactly when it was that Rodriguez first took notice of the fuel gauge. It is safe to say that no matter when he did, he would have seen that the fuel tank was near empty. He turned onto the northbound Santa Ana Freeway with two Bell Gardens police cars, their overhead lights flashing and sirens wailing, right on his tail. One of those police cars was driven by the Bell Gardens chief of police, who just happened to be in the area and monitored the updates from the CHP.

The chase was on. California Highway Patrol units joined in and assumed primary responsibility for the pursuit, as the taxicab merged onto the northbound Long Beach Freeway then exited onto surface streets in Monterey Park and Alhambra. At speeds no greater than forty-five miles per hour, he continued weaving his way through residential streets. He stood no chance of escaping his pursuers. He managed to get back onto the southbound Long Beach Freeway then turned east onto the Pomona Freeway. Television news helicopters, which had been monitoring the police radio traffic, began following. The car chase was broadcast live. Owing to heavy traffic, speeds never really exceeded more than seventy miles an hour.

Nearly a dozen police units, almost all CHP, remained clearly visible in his rear and side view mirrors for the twenty mile pursuit. But as the taxicab neared the Rosemead Boulevard exit, it began to sputter, out of gas, decelerated significantly and rolled slowly to a halt. Sitting there in a lane of the always congested Pomona Freeway at Whittier Narrows, the five hour long standoff began.

With a heavily armed and apparently desperate bank robber holed up inside the taxicab, the CHP shutdown both sides of the freeway as a precaution. They lay tire puncturing spike strips across all eastbound lanes of the freeway, several hundred feet ahead of him. Even though no traffic stop is ever routine, things thus far had worked out in favor of the CHP. That's when Rodriguez made his situation much worse.

CHP Officer Luis Bravo was one of the officers who had taken up a position of cover behind his patrol car, more than fifty feet behind the taxi. As is their practice, the CHP units initiated felony stop procedures, essentially holding the driver at gunpoint while issuing him verbal commands. Normally, these end peacefully. Following instructions to raise his hands, the officers noted that he had extended his middle finger on both hands, clearly “flipping off” the officers, before lowering his hands, in defiance of orders. A few moments later, Officer Bravo saw the driver display what appeared to be a pipe bomb.

It did not take long for the closure of the Pomona Freeway to cause a domino effect of massive gridlock throughout the entire Los Angeles freeway system.

Rodriguez chose a poor spot for an armed standoff. Off to his immediate right, on the south side of the freeway, was an outdoor trap and skeet firing range. To his left, on the north side, was an archery range. With no homes nearby and no pedestrians in peril, he had absolutely zero chance of escape. Adding to his rather dire predicament was a nearby freeway overpass that provided officers with a means of looking down into his taxicab.

A Special Weapons Team from the Special Enforcement Bureau of the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department and bomb technicians from the Arson-Explosives Detail were summoned.

SEB consists of several full-time teams made up of assaulters, paramedics and canines, with teams deployed daily in the Los Angeles area to conduct high-threat suspect searches, search warrant services and incidents where the probability of armed resistance is high.

In this case, an SEB Special Weapons Team was deployed, complete with snipers, heavily armed tactical deputies, armored vehicles and crisis negotiators. They took over the cordon positions from CHP officers and placed snipers and trained observers in places where they could observe the actions of the armed man in the taxicab. Through spotting scopes, the snipers watched Rodriguez as he sat in the driver’s seat, wearing a helmet, ballistic face mask and vest. Even through a telescopic lens, he seemed quite angry, more so

when he waved both a pipe bomb and a pistol at the officers. Once, he was seen tying the fuses of two pipe bombs together.

Bomb technicians from the Arson-Explosives Detail were asked to provide an expert opinion regarding the pipe bombs that had been observed, namely how were they designed to be employed, how initiated, what would be the expected blast radius, etc. From the descriptions provided by SWT snipers and CHP Officer Bravo, bomb technicians came to the conclusion that they were short-fused pipe bombs, intended to be lit and thrown. If there had been just the one pipe bomb, the danger radius would have been a certain number of feet. However, there was the issue of not knowing what else, other than the stolen money, was inside the satchel bag, unseen by everyone other than the bank employees and Mirhan, the observant citizen.

At the request of crisis negotiators and the SWT commander, Detective-Bomb Technician Mike Cofield used a remotely operated robot to deliver a specialty telephone to the taxi driver. With news helicopters filming from high above, the robot approached the driver's side of the taxi, the telephone held at the end of an extendable arm. The SWT commander watched over Detective Cofield's shoulder at the images provided by the robot cameras, offering him a close-up view of a severely agitated and desperate man.

At first, Rodriguez just chose to ignore the robot, until Detective Cofield spoke through the robot microphone and convinced him to lower the driver's side window and take the phone. He grabbed it, took a good look at it then tossed it into the street. Detective Cofield used the robot to retrieve the phone, picked it up and dropped it directly through the open window into Rodriguez's lap. Perhaps convinced that the robot wasn't going to take no for an answer, Rodriguez picked up the receiver and began a long conversation with a crisis negotiator on the other end.

Meanwhile, Detective Cofield kept the robot snug up against the driver's door, effectively sealing that door as an exit. He also took advantage of Rodriguez's distracted telephone conversations with

negotiators to pan the camera left and right, zooming in and out, to examine the taxi interior.

Clearly visible on the dashboard was a police scanner. On the passenger seat were rifle and pistol magazines full of bullets, a loaded rifle and handgun, a gas mask and a second bulletproof vest on the seat as well. Detective Cofield could see a short length of fuse visible from one pocket of the vest. A satchel sat on the floorboards. Not only was there money visible in the open satchel but there also appeared to be more pipe bombs as well.

In both English and Spanish, Rodriguez's conversation with the negotiators continued, as they tried to convince him to end the siege peacefully.

"Tell your guys to take a clean shot," he said. Alternating between desperation and anger, he vowed more than once that as long as he had weapons and bombs to defend himself, he would not be taken alive. He wanted to "end it all," he said at one point. He threatened to shoot any officers that tried to get near him, saying that he could see officers behind the freeway center divider, behind their armored trucks and ahead of him on the overpass.

In an effort to convince him to surrender, SWT officers approached from behind an armored vehicle and fired two rounds of tear gas through the back window of the taxi. It startled him at first but he showed no signs of backing down. He quickly donned a gas mask. A sniper saw through a telescope that Rodriguez appeared ready to use the pistol in his hand to fire at the SWT team. The sniper squeezed the trigger of his rifle. Rodriguez was killed instantly.

The ordeal however, was far from over. A team of SWT deputies, including tactical paramedics Dana Vilander and Larry Swanson, approached the taxi on foot. Timing their approach just right, the robot backed away from the door, allowing the two SWT paramedics to gain access to Rodriguez. They determined that his head wound was fatal. Because of the presence of the pipe bombs and not knowing if he had rigged a booby trap, the assaulters and paramedics chose not to search the vehicle and withdrew to the safety of their armored vehicles.

At that point, Detective-Bomb Technicians Richard McClelland, Mike Digby and Don Shively positioned themselves behind a concrete barrier on the center divider and prepared for the next phase of the operation. Rodriguez had had a substantial amount of time to prepare a booby trap, so it was crucial that both he and the taxi be checked prior to his body being moved.

Detectives McClelland and Digby approached the opened driver's door of the taxi and carefully examined the lifeless body of Rodriguez and his surroundings for the possibility of booby trap hazards. Detective Digby checked his clothing while Detective McClelland scanned the interior of the taxi looking for indicators of a booby trap. They double checked each other's work, just to be safe. While there did appear to be pipe bombs under his seat and in the satchel, neither his body nor the taxi had actually been booby trapped.

To make the pipe bombs safe would require a significant amount of movement and because some were jammed beneath the seat, the robot would be of limited value. After consulting with coroner's personnel, Detectives McClelland, Shively and Digby removed Rodriguez's body to an area where coroner's personnel could safely work.

Only then, did Detective Cofield don a protective bomb suit, approach the pipe bomb laden taxi and begin removing a total of four pipe bombs that had been in the satchel, under the seat and atop the passenger seat. All had short lengths of fuse inserted, a sign that Rodriguez had intended to throw them like a grenade.

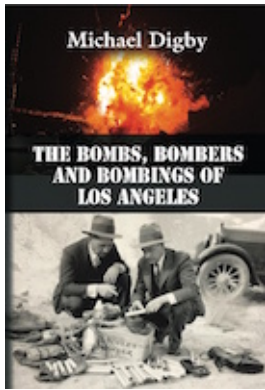
The Arson-Explosives Detail unit commander at the time of this incident was Lieutenant Tom Spencer and his presence at the scene was invaluable. The armed standoff was entering its fifth hour and the gridlock caused by the closure of such a main route began to adversely affect other freeways during rush hour. There were increasing calls from CHP and LASD bosses, offering a number of armchair solutions. While the need to open the freeway was absolutely understood, to do so in an unsafe way would not be wise. Lieutenant Spencer kept the "armchair warriors" occupied, allowing

the bomb technicians engaged in the operation to remain focused on their mission.

The one person in possession of the pipe bombs was now deceased. Now, the investigation and prosecution of those who took part in the assembly of the bombs and those engaged in planning or participation in the bank robbery required attention. It's an often overlooked and misunderstood aspect of these type of cases. It would be easy to close such a case simply naming Rodriguez as the culprit. But was he alone? Was anyone else complicit? Therefore, preserving forensic evidence was critical. Each pipe bomb would have to be disassembled individually. Doing so, Detective Cofield rendered each of them safe, preserved forensics and found that they did contain explosive powder.

A search of Rodriguez's home and a van registered to him in Los Angeles was conducted the following day by Bomb Technicians Tim Cooper and Dennis Gilbert of the LAPD Bomb Squad. Although no bombs were found, a cache of weapons, including four handguns, five rifles, a shotgun, night vision goggles and thousands of rounds of ammunition were recovered.

A joint investigation by the LASD and FBI concluded that Rodriguez alone had planned and executed the robbery.



It may be hard to imagine that there was ever a time in American history when terrorist and criminal bombings were as commonplace as today's random acts of gang violence. For more than a century, long before the words 'Al Qaeda' or 'ISIS' ever became part of our national media lexicon, bombing incidents have played a significant part in American crime annals, including right here in Los Angeles.

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work is largely forgotten.

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