

East Palo Alto — 1 year later

Police establish
their presence
in a rough city

By Jeff Brazil
Times Tribune staff

East Palo Alto Police Chief Danny Nelson has a story he tells that illustrates how far his department has come in its first year.

"I was driving through town ... it wasn't too long after we took over," he said. "It was pouring down rain and very early in the morning. I don't even think the sun was up yet.

"Anyway, I had to make a phone call and decided to use the pay phone at University and Bay. I got out of my car and as I was walking

Please see **POLICE**, A-12

Female officers
join the men
on tough beat

By Jeff Brazil
Times Tribune staff

East Palo Alto police Officer Karen Alberts decided to become a cop the hard way — at gunpoint.

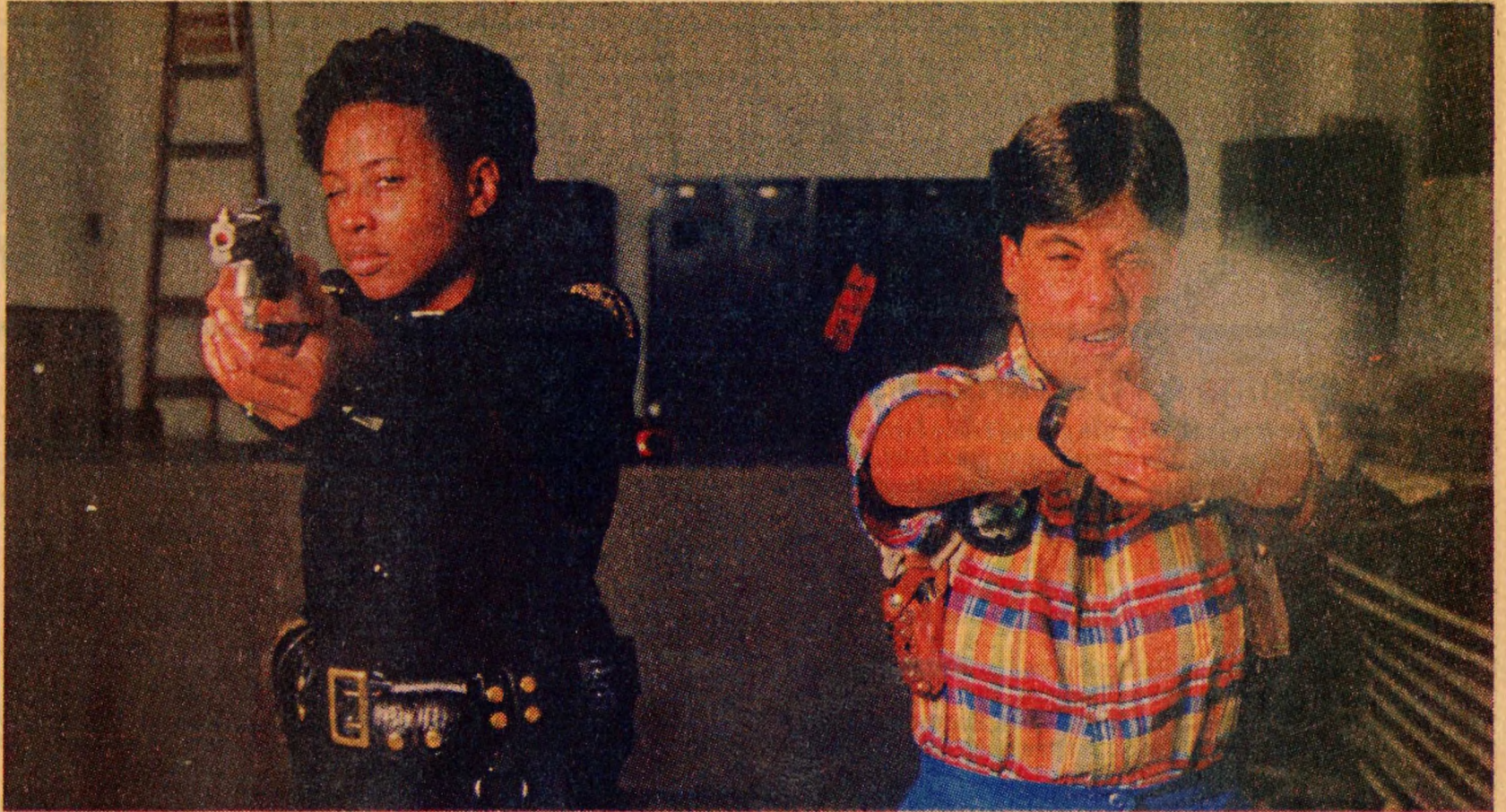
"It happened about three years ago," she said. "I was working part time at a gas station on Monterey

● *'Grapevine' vs. cops* — A-3

Highway in San Jose, trying to pick up a few extra bucks.

"One night my dad calls. He tells me he's concerned about my working at a gas station at night. I told

Please see **WOMEN**, A-12



Times Tribune staff photo by Sam Forencich

East Palo Alto police officers Elaine Loggins (left) and Karen Alberts indulge in a little target practice. Together, Loggins and Alberts, and two other women officers, Jenne Miller

and Marie Watts (not pictured), are among the most "productive" members of the department's 26 officers, according to their boss, Sgt. Nick Bennett.

Times Tribune

50 cents

Sunday, August 31, 1986

San Mateo County edition

WOMEN POLICE

Continued from A-1

him not to worry. The instant I put down the phone, some guy sticks a gun in my face and robs me.

"That's when I made up my mind to go into police work."

Alberts is one of four women officers on the East Palo Alto police force. They work some of the meanest streets in the Bay Area, and, according to their boss, are among the department's finest.

"They're some of my best producers," Sgt. Nick Bennett said. "They're very aggressive."

The other three women are Detective Jenne Miller, and Officers Marie Watts and Elaine Loggins.

Alberts and Miller recently talked about their jobs and the dangers they face each day.

Both said they like working in East Palo Alto because there is always plenty of work to go around.

"A person can get a lot of experience here in a short period of time," Miller said. "Six months here is equivalent to working two to three years in most other cities."

Miller's decision to go into law enforcement wasn't quite as dramatic as Alberts'.

Miller, 29, decided to join the force in the summer of 1984 after meeting some police officers on a Palo Alto softball team.

Up until then, she had worked for the College of San Mateo and as a marketing representative.

"Normal jobs," she said.

After spending six months with the Los Altos police as a community service officer, she applied for her current job in January 1985 and was sent to the police academy.

Her first assignment in East Palo Alto was as a detective.

Like her fellow investigators, she worked a little bit of everything — burglary, robbery, child abuse, assault and even homicide.

Her most memorable case?

"It was a murder," she said. "A man got hit with a .22-caliber bullet. I remember it because the doctors said he shouldn't have died. But the bullet hit him in just the right spot.

"I was with him from five minutes after he got shot to the time they pronounced him dead about 45 minutes later. They really tried to save him, but just couldn't.

"We caught the suspect about two or three months later."

Alberts, 23, who worked as a detective and is now back on patrol, said the case that sticks in her mind most also was a homicide.

"It was so senseless," she said. "This 49-year-old lady was stabbed more than 15 times by her co-worker. He wanted her money to buy some (cocaine).

"I got the guy, though."

Both Alberts and Miller said the streets get a little scary at night, especially when you're the first one on the scene.

"When it's dark out there and you're in uniform, you stick out like a sore thumb," Miller said. "Yeah, you start looking behind you."

They said things got a little more scary after Jan. 3 when fellow Officer Rod Larmour was stabbed during a routine traffic stop.

"I had the jitters that night," Alberts said. "That really hit close to home. Rod and I had worked together. I was fine on the scene. But when I got back to the station, I broke down."

Alberts and Miller said they see a side of life everyday in East Palo Alto that most people won't see in a lifetime.

But for now, they said, that's OK.

Continued from A-1

to the phone, somebody walked up behind me and asked me if I wanted to buy some dope.

"I couldn't believe it. Here it was practically before dawn on a Saturday morning, pouring down rain and this guy is trying to sell dope to the chief of police across the street from the police station.

"I was so shocked I didn't say a word. I just waved him away. But I decided right then and there what our first goal was."

It has been a year since that incident, "and they don't dare try to sell dope to the police anymore," the police chief said.

That story perhaps best describes what East Palo Alto's 26 police officers have accomplished since they hit the streets July 1, 1985.

There were few surprises.

The city's army of drug dealers didn't pack up and leave. Nor did the Peninsula's youngest police force turn the crime-ridden city into a place where residents can walk the streets at night without fear.

On the other hand, crime didn't become rampant after the new police force took over from the San Mateo County Sheriff's Department.

"As far as I'm concerned, our first accomplishment is that we were able to establish a police presence in this city," said Sgt. Nick Bennett, head of investigations. "The word on the street after the Sheriff's Department left was that the crooks were going to push us into the Bay. But we were ready for them and it never happened."

There were, indeed, some victories.

For example, between July 1, 1985, and June 30, 1986, the department made 1,529 arrests, an average of about four a day, according to department statistics.

That is 2½ times as many as the Sheriff's Department made in the same period the year before. (However, the Sheriff's Department, even when its substation was at full strength, had only 19 deputies patrolling East Palo Alto in 1984.)

Of the 1,529 arrests, nearly a third of those — 492 — were drug related. In February alone, police made 75 narcotics arrests, mostly for sales and possession.

From the beginning, police, residents and city officials considered street-corner drug sales the department's nemesis.

The primary targets were University Avenue and Euclid Park.

Today, even skeptics will admit that both areas have been cleaned up to some extent, although a good portion of the credit goes to the county's Narcotics Task Force.

"That was the acid test," Nelson said. "On any given summer day, you could see 150 people on that corner (University and Bay) doing all kinds of anti-social things like dealing drugs. It was an eyesore and it was right across the street from the Police Department.

"I said from the beginning that if we couldn't move those people, we couldn't do anything. Well, we moved them."

Unfortunately, as even Nelson admits, the wily dealers didn't leave town — they just moved to more clandestine areas.

"The immediate goal was to get them out of the public eye," Bennett said. "They're now dealing out of houses and cars. But we know that and we'll get them."

The open question is the same one that was posed a year ago.

Will the department ever have enough people to make significant headway against the city's 15-year history of drug trafficking, burglaries and violent crimes?

Skeptics, while praising the fledgling department, wonder whether a city with only 18,500 residents will ever be able to afford a police force big enough to combat such big-city crime.

The city already has allocated about 27 percent of next year's \$5.6 million budget to the Police Department, and there are no plans for hiring more officers.

"I think they've gotten off to a good start," East Palo Alto City Councilman Warnell Coats said. "The problem is, there isn't enough officers.

"It seems like every time you pick up the paper, two people have

been killed at the Casa Palo Motel or somebody has been stabbed on Cooley Avenue. That's got to stop."

"It doesn't matter how good you feel about the city and the department until the crime statistics show that crime is down substantially."

The number of reported major crimes actually has increased since the department took over.

From July 1985 to June 1986, there were 1,926 reported major crimes — murder, rape, robbery, assault, burglary and theft. That represents a 14 percent increase over the same period in 1984 and 1985.

The number of reported thefts jumped the most — from 462 to 769, a 67 percent increase.

Reported residential burglaries went from 499 to 528. That represents a 17 percent increase, a sore spot with Nelson because he had targeted burglaries for reduction.

"That was the one goal that we really did not accomplish," Nelson said.

Nelson attributed some of the increase in reported crimes to the fact that the department is getting more calls than did the Sheriff's Department.

"That sounds like a cop-out," he said. "But I do think people have confidence in us and pick up the phone a little more often than they did in the past."

On the other hand, the number of reported rapes, 16, and robberies, 138, decreased from the previous year, when there were 22 reported rapes and 181 robberies.

Also, the number of reported crimes overall for the first half of this year was 14 percent lower than the last last half of 1985.

"It took us six months to get warmed up," Bennett said.

East Palo Alto Mayor Barbara Mouton said she has seen encouraging progress in the department's first year.

"They have been tested but they have come through it," she said. "We've seen a marked decrease in street-corner drug dealing.

"People are telling me that they feel good about the department. The officers are professional and efficient."

East Palo Alto City Councilman John Bostic added: "I don't think people necessarily feel any safer. But I do think they feel better about having their own police department — someone who will be responsive when they call for help."

If anything is certain about the first year, it is that the department has endured the growing pains expected of a newborn police force.

For example:

● Nelson received 46 complaints from residents alleging serious misconduct, such as police brutality. After an investigation into 30 of the complaints, four officers left the department and four others were suspended.

"On the surface, that would seem high," Nelson said. "And it is. No. 1, some of our initial recruits were slugs. I've gotten rid of them. No. 2, our clientele is a little bit rougher than in places like Menlo Park and Palo Alto."

The remaining 16 complaints have not yet been investigated.

● The San Mateo County District Attorney's Office returned many police reports in the department's initial months, saying they were not written well or carefully enough to file a complaint.

Of 723 cases submitted to the District Attorney's Office in the first six months, 35 percent of them, or 254, were returned.

Poorly written reports are a problem at all police departments, according to Assistant District Attorney Steve Wagstaffe, who sees most of East Palo Alto's cases.

Since then, the quality of the reports has improved, Wagstaffe said. From Jan. 1 to June 30, the department submitted 1,039 cases and 827, or about 80 percent, were accepted.

● On Jan. 3, Officer Rod Larmour was critically stabbed during what began as a routine traffic stop. Larmour, who has yet to return to regular duty, will be awarded the Purple Heart this week.

Two other members of the department, Officer Rhinaldo Rhodes and police service technician Benny Pugh, also were injured in the incident.

Residents and city officials praised the officers for not firing their weapons during the melee.

Overall, Nelson gives his troops a seven on a scale of 10 for their first year's performance.