

LAPD SWAT/LASD SEB Joint Training, Circa 1982



Ron and Sandra McCarthy

Remembering

RON MCCARTHY

Reflections on the Passing of a SWAT Legend

BY NTOA DIRECTOR EMERITUS PHIL HANSEN



LAPD SWAT Training, Circa 1975



Ron with NTOA Founder John Kolman



Circa 1974

The SWAT concept as we know it today is well into its seventh decade of existence. With the inevitable passage of time, we suffer the loss of those pioneers who not only fathered the discipline but who went on to spend much of their lives nurturing, evolving and professionalizing the field of law enforcement tactical operations. On Nov. 24, 2023, we said farewell to our dear friend and mentor, Ron McCarthy.

Ronald M. McCarthy was and will remain an iconic figure in our industry. Apart from his storied career as a Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) SWAT member, Ron was a celebrated trainer, author, and mentor to his brothers and sisters in arms. His span of active service to our calling lasted nearly 60 years. Some men rise head and shoulders above the crowd in terms of their passion and sacrifice for our profession. Ron McCarthy was one such

man, and his story should be mandatory reading for anyone who is or aspires to be a professional law enforcement tactical operator.

Growing up the hard way

Absent his grit and strength of character, Ron McCarthy’s story could easily have been an American tragedy as opposed to the tale of achievement and impact on others that it has become. Some details of Ron’s early life serve to aid in understanding the obstacles he faced, and to give us an appreciation for the true measure of the man he became.

Ron’s father died when he was two years old and he was bounced from place to place, including an orphanage and several foster homes. At age 15, he was living in an abandoned rail car and had a job pumping gas at a nearby filling station, when he was taken in by a good family that gave him his first real opportunity to live a stable life until he graduated from high school. Ron made the most of that opportunity, worked hard in school, and excelled as a student athlete in football and basketball. He was even elected prom king.

After graduation, Ron realized the need to pursue structure and discipline in his life, not to mention the importance of regular meals and a place to live. He enlisted in the United States Navy, where he served honorably for four years. Typical of Ron’s humility and wit, he would later joke during training lectures that he never really served in the military, but he was in the Navy.

LAPD and beyond

After his discharge from the Navy, Ron came to Los Angeles with the goal of becoming an LAPD officer. In 1960, he graduated from the LAPD Academy as the class Honor Cadet, after which he served tours of duty in south-central Los Angeles at 77th Street Division, Vice Bureau, and at Labor Relations, which was then a part of Metropolitan Division, the eventual home of LAPD SWAT. Based on his exceptional performance, he was soon promoted to sergeant and allowed to remain at Metro.

With his strong team orientation, athleticism and tenacious work ethic, Ron was a natural for Metro. He became a plank holder in SWAT, and eventually earned the respected position of assistant platoon leader, which carries the coveted designation of 20D, a call sign he identified with and was justifiably proud of for the rest of his life.

In 1974, Ron and five other SWAT members received the LAPD Medal of Valor for their actions during the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) barricaded suspect operation, often referred to as the SLA shootout. The SLA had previously kidnapped newspaper heiress Patricia Hearst, so the incident captured worldwide attention as it unfolded on live television. The SLA shootout became the genesis for SWAT becoming a household word. The incident constitutes a highly significant milestone in the history of SWAT and any operator unfamiliar with the details would do well to research the event.

Always known as an innovative thinker and problem solver, Ron was instrumental in the development of LAPD airborne platform shooting techniques, vehicle hostage rescue tactics, and a host of innovative procedures. In later years, Ron also played a significant role in training and development associated with less-lethal weaponry and flash-sound diversionary devices.

Ron had an immense impact on all aspects of LAPD SWAT. In addition to his mastery as an innovator and tactical operator, he designed the universally recognized LAPD SWAT logo, and as a means of bringing positive notoriety to SWAT, Ron was a founder of the original Death Valley Relay race, the spirit of which continues to this day as it has morphed into the Baker-to-Vegas “Challenge Cup Relay.” It is an annual law enforcement relay race, 120 miles in length, featuring 20 stages, up to 300 teams and thousands of runners.

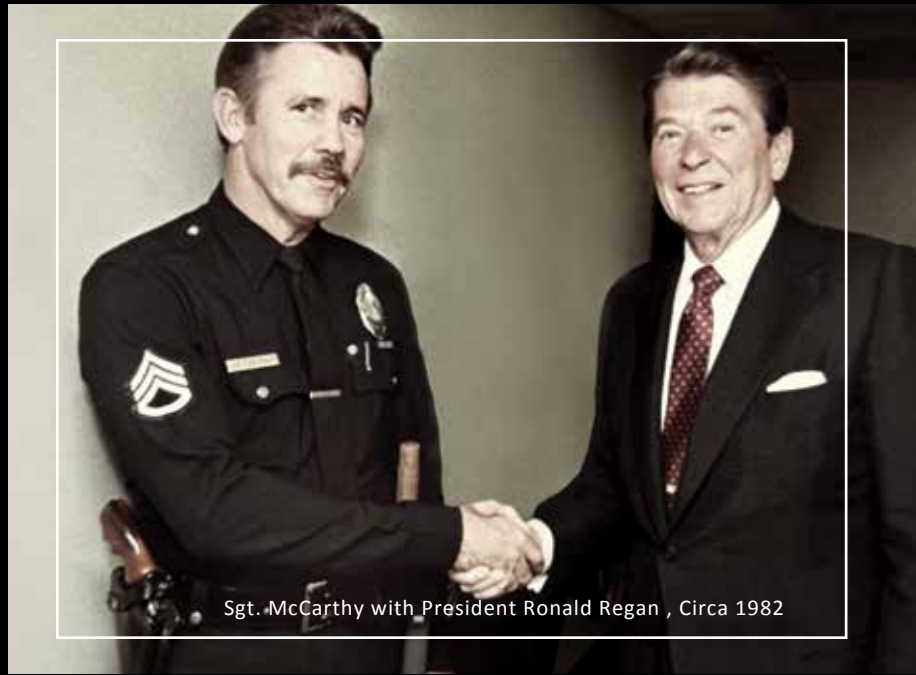
After 24 years of exemplary service, Ron retired from the LAPD, but his contributions to the law enforcement community at large were just beginning. He soon became chief of tactical operations for the United States Department of Energy, Special Response Training Team in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Two years later, he was appointed director of Deadly Force Training Grants for the U.S. Department of Justice, and he accepted the position of training manager for the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), where he placed an emphasis on training for SWAT command staff.

Ron eventually left public service to establish his own business, R. M. McCarthy and Associates, where he committed much of his time to the development of safety equipment for police officers, specifically body armor. He worked closely with the National Institute of Justice in setting standards for body armor.

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Ron with his son John



Sgt. McCarthy with President Ronald Regan , Circa 1982



Ron with his daughter Sheri



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An indelible mark on our profession

Early in the development of SWAT, Ron was introduced to another visionary leader from across town. Sergeant John Kolman from the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department’s Special Enforcement Bureau (LASD/SEB) made an unscheduled visit to LAPD SWAT to introduce himself and propose joint training sessions between the two units. During that introduction, John Kolman met with Ron and Officer Michael Hillmann, another man who would achieve legendary status in the world of tactical operations. John Kolman, Ron McCarthy and Mike Hillmann became life-long friends with a common passion for excellence in the field of law enforcement tactics. That initial meeting served as the genesis for decades of friendship, collaboration and support between LAPD/SWAT and LASD/SEB that flourishes to this day.

In 1983, John Kolman founded the National Tactical Officers Association (NTOA) to provide training and serve as a nationwide source of information exchange between tactical teams. Ron McCarthy and Mike Hillmann were among the NTOA’s first members and served as consultants and authors in the initial issues of *The Tactical Edge*, as well as primary trainers at the association’s annual conferences. Ron’s seminal 1988 article, “The command decision to shoot a hostage taker: How do we make it?,” was, for many of us, the first time we had heard the “priority of life” doctrine clearly articulated in a training document. The doctrine has since been modified for presentation as the “safety priorities,” but the foundation of Ron’s thinking, his observations and his groundbreaking article remain sound and relevant to this day.

By the early 1990s, the NTOA had grown to such an extent that a decision was made to transition the association from a privately managed institution to an official nonprofit association with an overseeing board of directors who were elected on a regional basis. Ron was among our first directors, and he continued to serve the NTOA for many years as an instructor, author, director at large and director emeritus. Ron was a mainstay of the association, and several annual conferences featured an event titled “An

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Evening with Ron McCarthy,” a very popular segment in which Ron would entertain attendees with recollections on SWAT history in his own, unvarnished way while enlightening them with his insights regarding current challenges facing the tactical community.

Ron McCarthy’s contributions to the growth and professionalism of our discipline were in no way limited to his impact on the NTOA. He was also a tremendous supporter and contributor to the California Association of Tactical Officers (CATO), and he often served without compensa-

tion as an expert witness to defend police officers. Ron was awarded the NTOA Lifetime Achievement Award in 1996, and the CATO Lifetime Achievement Award in 2010. In 2018, Ron finally “retired” at 81 years of age.

A mentor in life, love and character

In January 2024, a celebration of life was held for Ron McCarthy near his home in Dana Point, California. It was a true celebration in fact as well as in name, as nearly 300 family, friends, old partners and noted SWAT leaders from across the country assembled to joyfully recall a man they loved and revered.

Ron had a foundational love and appreciation for family that was undoubtedly affected by his own early life experience. He also truly envisioned fellow law enforce-

ment officers as his own brothers and sisters. Indeed, Ron’s actual family is deeply entwined with the profession. His son, “Big John” McCarthy, the celebrated MMA referee, is a retired LAPD officer, and Ron’s daughter, Sheri McCarthy Anderson, is a retired LASD lieutenant. Both provided beautiful remembrances of Ron, as did his grandson and namesake, a young Ron McCarthy, who is an LASD detective.

One of Big John’s recollections sums up Ron’s character nicely. It concerns a life lesson that his dad taught him: “Change in circumstance does not change your responsibility.” When Ron made a commitment or accepted a responsibility of any kind, he was undeterred in his mission to fulfill it, no matter what came up. Ron’s words were his bond, and excuses were never acceptable.

Another presenter and former partner recalled how on one training day in the field, Ron encountered a shoeless,

distressed and destitute young man. After speaking to the boy, Ron disappeared for a short time and soon returned with a pair of shoes, some food money and directions for where he could get some help. Ron knew from personal experience how tough life can be, and his compassion for others ran as deep as his courage.

I was privileged to work alongside Ron on the NTOA Board of Directors for over 25 years. The board always has been made up of honorable men who serve the association with passion, but there are questions and, at times, disagreements about the right direction to take on an issue. It was not unusual for Ron to serve as the conscience of our board. He had a laser-like focus on our mission and a steadfast commitment to maintaining the NTOA's reputation for excellence in training and honesty in our dealings with others. He expected nothing less than our best effort for our membership, whom he viewed as family, and for the legacy of his dear friend, our founder, John Kolman.

Ron's celebration was attended by his beautiful wife, Sandra, their children, 10 grandchildren and 15 great-grandchildren. As one viewed the photos of Ron and his family, there was absolutely no doubt about the joy he felt when in their presence. Ron was a man's man, and he was

tough as nails, but his capacity for love was a part of his great strength.

I was speaking with Sandra at the conclusion of the service, and she told me that throughout their marriage, Ron never left the house even to go to the store without first saying "I love you." For many of us who have been guilty of becoming too engrossed in our work at the expense of our families, it's one last fitting lesson from a wonderful friend and mentor. We love you too, Ron. God bless and keep you until we meet again.

About the author



Phil Hansen retired as chief of police for the Santa Maria (CA) Police Department. Prior to his service in Santa Maria, he retired as a captain from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department with 36 years of service. Most of his work was in the field of tactical operations and critical incident command, including 13 years as a full-time SWAT sergeant/team leader and six years as the SWAT lieutenant/team commander for SEB. He was an elected member of the NTOA board of directors for 20 years and was chairman of the board from 2008 to 2013; he now serves as a director emeritus.



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