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Even in the midst of gunfire, FBI agents give public an insiders view

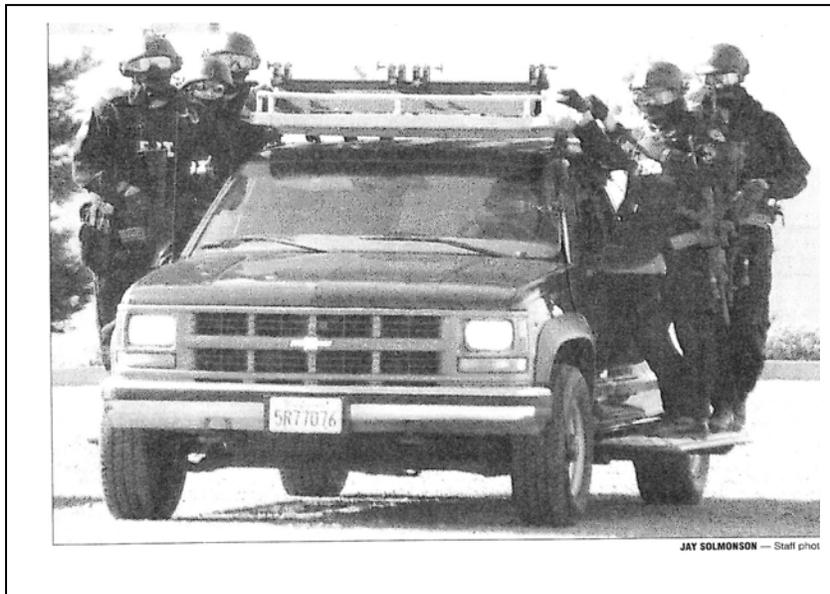
Simon Read, STAFF WRITER

DUBLIN — Under the cover of sniper fire and the detonation of flash-bang grenades, six members of an FBI assault team took out half a dozen crazed gunmen holding hostages behind Santa Rita jail Friday morning. The raid — carried out amidst smoke and a hail of well-placed gunfire — was over in minutes. The FBI snipers deadly aim was evident in the splattered watermelons that represented two of the terrorists.

The impressive demonstration was part of the first citizens academy hosted by the San Francisco division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Forget agents Mulder and Scully investigating The X-Files. One purpose of the academy is to demystify the workings of an agency that has inspired Hollywood for years and has taken on a certain mystique in the minds of many.

People want to understand the FBI, Special Agent LaRae Quy said. People should understand the FBI ... very few TV shows and movies are based on reality.



The first class to attend the academy was there by the bureau's own invitation.

Thirty people — some of them community leaders — attended one class a week for six weeks.

From the basics of investigation to the complexities of forensics and the legal issues surrounding wiretaps, the course is a mini-FBI academy that covers nearly every facet of the agency's work.

Mark Mershon, special-agent-in-charge of the FBI's San

Francisco division, said he wants prominent and respected people to be exposed to what we do and how we do it.

We want them to learn what the real FBI is all about, he said.

San Francisco City Administrator Bill Lee said attending the program has helped him better understand the FBI's mission.

Many people think the FBI is a secret organization, he said. But (the agents) are just like us. They're dads and soccer moms, but their bigger role is to protect Americans.

Lee said he comes into contact on his job with a lot of immigrants who have a distrust of government and federal agencies. He said he hopes his time spent attending the academy will help him placate the misgivings newcomers to the United States might have regarding federal organizations.

A lot of people come here from countries where they don't trust the government, he said.

Nancy Appel, an associate director of the Anti-Defamation League, said she admires the series of checks and balances that regulate the FBI's activities.

These people have a heavy responsibility and they have to take their job seriously, she said. But I do think there is a lot of mistrust out there. Some think people join agencies like this to become cowboys and cowgirls.

Fridays class — which was the final session before the attendees graduated — was a real hands-on experience. Participants had the chance to fire a number of weapons kept in the FBI's arsenal, from a standard issue .40-caliber Glock pistol to a Thompson submachine gun and M-16 assault rifle.



Having just fired a few rounds from a Glock semi-automatic, retired U.S. Navy Adm. John Bitoff said the current state of world affairs increased his interest in the FBI.

Particularly in this time of terrorism and homeland security, I thought it was important to get an insiders view of what the FBI does, Bitoff said. It's interesting to see how they have to operate within strict parameters of the law. There are some terribly laborious procedures they have to go through.

Special Agent Mershon said agents are held to an extreme level of accountability.

If an agent is involved in a shooting and kills or injures a suspect, the agent automatically becomes the focus of an investigation conducted by the civil rights division of the U.S. Department of Justice.

It's important for people to know what we go through, Mershon said. People should know what the job involves and the toll it can take.

Although the participation to the academy is currently through invitation only, those interested in learning more can contact the San Francisco office of the FBI at (415) 553-7400.

And, again, forget Agent Mulder chasing little green men.

When we see stuff like that, we laugh and roll our eyes, Quy said.

Staff writer Simon Read can be reached at (925) 416-4849, or sread@angnewspapers.com.

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