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# LEGAL DEFENSE TRUST TRAINING BULLETIN

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## WE DON'T WANT TO HONOR YOUR NAME UPON *THE WALL*

*By Michael P. Stone, Esq.*

I pick up the November 2000 issue of the Los Angeles Police Protective League's newspaper, *The Thin Blue Line*. I see it is so rightly dedicated to the honor and memory of Officer Robert Joseph ("Bobby Joe") Mata, Serial 32571; a young, vibrant 28 year-old officer assigned to Harbor Area's Special Enforcement Section. I read that Bobby Joe was killed in a collision on September 19, 2000, responding to another officer's call for help, and that Bobby Joe leaves his widow Holly, a Los Angeles Deputy Sheriff, and two young daughters Kalei and Pinali, and many other family members.

I think to myself, that over the past 33 years, working in three municipal police departments, and in representing law enforcement officers exclusively over the past 21, I have attended a lot of police funerals--too many, too many. I remember that in some cases, I worked with the officers, or knew them. Most of the time, I did not; but I would go for the same reasons we all do: to honor, to thank and to remember.

I recall over these years, noticing that it doesn't get easier; it isn't more comfortable; now it is more difficult to put it out of mind, even though out of the sight and emotion of the moment. I am not willing to accept that we must continue to lose our brothers and sisters in the line of duty in the numbers we see.

I remember as a young police officer in the 60's and 70's, I could manage to hold it together at these sorrowful events--even when the officer was a colleague. I suppressed and restrained the emotion and the feelings, together with the inevitable welling of tears, by reminding myself that "this

is part of the job,” and sometimes, despite all the care, caution and safety consciousness employed, one or more of society’s predators would take out another of our officers or deputies by violence. It was a matter of odds; it was fate; it was, after all, God’s plan—tragic, but inevitable. Okay. So I would brace myself for the process and get through it—just like you do.

But I don’t think this way anymore. And this is why I can no longer restrain the emotion. I don’t do very well at police funerals. With each one, it is harder to appear stoic. So I don’t—I cannot. My emotions let me down more and more it seems.

In our beloved American Society For Law Enforcement Training (ASLET), we have a mission statement: “Keep The Walls Bare.” This refers to the walls of our Nation’s Law Enforcement Officers’ Memorial in Washington, D.C., upon which are etched the names of all of our country’s law enforcement members killed in the line of duty. It is a beautiful thing. After it was erected, on one very cold January evening, I stood with many ASLET trainers in a candle-light vigil with “Coach” Bob Lindsey of Louisiana, as he led us in dedication. If you visit Washington D.C., be sure to go and see. Since ASLET’s membership is dedicated to training, it takes no imagination to realize how much of what we do is designed to keep you safe, and see you safely back home with your families at EOW. In this way, we do what we can to “Keep The Walls Bare.”

But all of this, and everything else that is done by your academy trainers, your FTO’s, your supervisors and your department’s leaders will not do the job, unless each of you remembers well, *every* time you head out on the street in your radio car, *every* time you make a traffic stop, *every* time you go on a domestic call, *every* time you make an arrest or shakedown some street punk, it can happen to you--without warning, suddenly, and with little opportunity for you to react. There are people out there--many, many of them, who will hurt you and kill you. You won’t know who they are, or when they will try. And all of the training you have had will be of little consequence to the outcome if you are not ready and prepared for it when it happens. This takes *constant concentration*: **it takes putting your safety above all else--all the time, in every situation.** By looking out for yourself, you are looking out for your partner, whom you will not be able to help if you go down.

In closing argument in in the first Rodney King trial back in 1992, I told the jury,  
***“We pay our police officers to win street fights and gun battles--we don’t give out second place ribbons. We don’t pay our police to roll around in the dirt with the likes of Rodney King. A police officer’s duty does not require him to end up on a gurney in the emergency room, or toes-up on a slab at the county morgue.”***

In speaking to some of the jurors after their verdicts of “not guilty”, they told me those words had a great impact on their decision. These were good lay citizens--*They understood the message and the concept.* It would be well for each of you to reflect upon and think about these *truths* always. It will help you to remember that *you count first* --please do it.

I should add that there is no critical comment here on Bobby Joe Mata’s circumstances. It is just that his name, sadly, must now go upon the Wall; and that is plainly our tragedy. *Like so many of your brethren before you, Bobby Joe, we honor and love you for the sacrifice you made.* To the rest of you, please “Keep The Walls Bare”. This is our quest—all of us in ASLET, and each of us cares about you.

I couldn’t attend Bobby Joe Mata’s service.

Now... I open the *Blue Line's* center section to two full pages of color photos of the event: I see the procession of police cars; I see the dignitaries; I see the coffin and the flag; I see Bobby Joe's bewildered children; I see the riderless Mounted Unit horse, with the empty boots turned backward in the stirrups; I see the ranks of hundreds of saddened officers at salute; I see the grieving widow, Holly; her limp body draped across the casket of her felled hero Bobby Joe. I gaze at all of the pictures while I write these words. I think of my son, now in the police academy, whom I love so dearly. And even here in the solitude of my home study; eyes filling with liquid—it is difficult to see, as I write this to you.

Stay safe, please. We don't want to honor your name upon *The Wall*.

- Michael P. Stone

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