

Shooting aftermath

The new year has been an eternity for lawmen

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SANTA CRUZ — "It's been a long year," sighed one local peace officer this morning.

Despite the fact that the new year is only seven days old, Monday's shooting of Sheriff's Deputy Mike Gray and California Highway Patrolman Jeff Lee has weighed heavily on local law enforcement.

"We're not more afraid than before," said a Santa Cruz policeman as he got into his patrol car Wednesday night. "But this kind of thing (the shooting) makes you more aware of the dangers out there."

Deputy Gray was on a routine patrol Monday about 1 p.m. when he stopped to talk with a suspicious-looking hitchhiker.

What followed was, according to witnesses, a totally unprovoked attack.

The suspicious-looking person, officials say, turned out to be Leslie Grover Wyman, a 44-year-old self-styled survivalist — a loner who's spent the past 10 years living off the land in San Mateo and Santa Cruz counties.

The hitchhiker first gunned down Gray and then Lee, who had responded to Gray's cries for help over the radio. Then, the hitchhiker accosted a couple at the entrance to Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park and disappeared down the San Lorenzo River.

He has been at large since the shooting.

Sheriff's deputies in San Mateo County told The Sentinel that they've known Wyman, the suspect, for years.

Wyman's sister is a sheriff's deputy in that county and his brother works as a San Mateo County district attorney investigator, they said.

"We've had contact with him over the years," said one deputy. "He always seemed weird."

The deputies say they've been on the trail for Wyman since the shooting. They've contacted residents of areas where Wyman was known to frequent in his wanderings through the mountains.

They say Wyman has lived along Skyline Boulevard, Highway 236 and in La

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Honda, as well as recently in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

"He knows the area really well," said a deputy. "He apparently knows all the fire trails and paths through the mountains. It wouldn't surprise me if he had gotten out of Santa Cruz the first day."

The deputies say Wyman used to hitch rides with local residents. "The drivers who give him rides say he's quiet, and keeps to himself until they start talking about jobs. Then he starts yakking about communism and imperialism and the like.

"He does the same thing when he wants to get out," the deputy said. "He just gives them a nudge and says he wants to get let out. It's often in the middle of nowhere."

One San Lorenzo Valley resident, James Huston, told deputies earlier this week that he'd given Wyman a ride up Highway 9 around Christmastime.

Huston told deputies he gave Wyman a ride to about the 5-mile marker on Highway 9, near Felton. Wyman told Huston that's where he wanted to be let out and then took off hiking up the hill.

Reported sightings of Wyman — or persons resembling Wyman — have been pouring in from as far away as the Oregon border, said Sheriff's Chief Deputy Marv Gangloff.

San Mateo County deputies said they thought Wyman had been seen in Redwood City a few days after the shooting.

Gangloff said he's received several reports from the area, but like all other sightings, none has panned out.

Still, deputies and other law enforcement agencies in Northern California are following up on leads and sightings.

Wyman was reported seen at St. Pius Catholic Church in Redwood City on Tuesday, said a church spokeswoman. "But it could have been another guy resembling Wyman," she added.

Wyman is believed to be armed with a 9mm automatic handgun.

According to Sheriff's Sgt. Carl Kuebler, that weapon was developed by the Germans in 1908 for military use. It was standard issue for a submachine gun or handgun, and is designed primarily for shooting humans.

"Used with hollow-point bullets, it can cause a considerable amount of damage," he said.

It is considered a higher-intensity firearm than a .38-caliber handgun, he added.

Deputy Gray and CHP officer Lee were shot with ammunition probably of the hollow-point kind, officials believe.

Gray was critically wounded by two shots to his stomach — one delivered at close range, witnesses said.

Lee was struck in the wrist and thigh and was released Thursday morning from Community Hospital.

Since the shootings, Sheriff's Sgt. Bruce Simpson said he's seen more precautions being taken by deputies he supervises.

"I'd say we're doing more felony stops when we see something suspicious than before," he said. Felony stops typically involve more than one patrol car and the use of drawn weapons.

He added there's a fine line between what the public perceives as courteous police conduct and what the officers believe is necessary use of force for safety.

"I'd say this is one of the big issues these days for us," he added.

Deputy Gray was not wearing a bullet-proof vest when he stopped to talk with Wyman. But officials have said that even if he was, he would have been wounded by the kinds of bullets Wyman used.

While bullet-proof vests are not standard equipment for sheriff's deputies, many deputies are wearing them these days.

"I wouldn't want to go out without one," said Simpson.