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# **POLICE: Reserve officers fill important role**

## **Why everyday working people put themselves in the line of fire in their spare time**

Reserve officers have a long history with California police departments, dating back to the necessity of home-front protection in World War II. Today, most forces in and around the Bay Area rely heavily on these part-time police to fill out staffs that have been diminished by budget cuts.

While the police departments' motivation in hiring reserve officers seems clear--maximize the number of law officers and minimize the costs--the motivation for the reserve officers is less apparent.

The death last weekend of Palo Alto Reserve Officer Theodore Brassinga--the second reservist to be killed in the department's history--and a drive-by shooting at a 27-year-old Palo Alto reserve officer last month have demonstrated the dangers involved in police work.

In the case of some reservists, police work is not their chosen profession. What is it about individuals that makes them risk their life for a night job?

Menlo Park Reserve Lt. Bob Wood--who will be celebrating 20 years this July in Menlo Park reserves--cites various reasons for his decision to join the reserves, such as concern about the civil disobedience prevalent in the early '70s, desire to earn extra money and a chance to accomplish one of his childhood dreams. "Going back to 1974, things were still up in the air about civil disobedience and the Vietnam War," he said. "I had always thought in my mind that I would like to be a policeman."

At 57, Wood is what is known as a career reserve police officer--an individual who is content in the reserve role and has stayed in that position for a number of years. The majority of this type have another career outside of law enforcement. Wood, for example, works at the U.S. Geological Survey.

A more common reason for becoming a reserve officer is a desire to get into law enforcement full-time and the hope of getting a leg up on the competition. Brassinga typified this second type, a young, enthusiastic individual who wanted to become a full-fledged police officer.

The training required to become a reservist involves some 200 hours of classroom time and a minimum of 400 hours in the field. Most reservists maintain full-time jobs at the same time. "It takes about six months to one year to go through the Reserve Academy," said Wood, citing his experience with the Menlo Park Police Department. "You put yourself through; the city doesn't pay for it."

In California, there are three levels of reserve police officers. A level three reservist can serve as a technician or on search and rescue missions. A level two reserve is a backup officer, and has to work under direct supervision of a regular officer with at least one year's tenure. A level one reserve can work alone, with the full range of police duties--writing tickets, filing reports and making arrests.

One major difference between reserve officers and regular officers is that when reservists go off duty they are no longer considered a police official, while regular officers are on duty 24 hours a day. The exception to this rule is the designated level one, who also is always on duty.

Wood said the people who make up the reserves are "the people that walk down the street."

The average reservist works 1,000 hours a year, which translates roughly to half-time, or 20 hours a week. In Menlo Park, Wood said, the hourly pay scale is equal to that of a first-step patrol, which means a new regular officer hire on the force--currently \$19.34 an hour. The pay is the same whether a reservist has been on the force two days or 20 years; seniority means nothing in the paycheck, he said. Cities like Menlo Park and Palo Alto, which both have paid reserves, are the exception and not the rule. "Most of the agencies pay their reserves zip," said Wood. "They will put in a 1,000 hours a year of free time."

The Brassinga tragedy brings up the question of what happens to the families of reservists who have been killed in the line of duty. Wood said if he were killed in the line of duty, his family would receive a death benefit from Workers Compensation, \$50,000 that the federal government gives to families of officers that have been killed and an insurance policy from the California Reserve Peace Officer Association. From the city, Wood said he would receive nothing. "That's why people think it's absolutely nuts to be a reserve," he said.

"What they do get," added Wood, "is the personal satisfaction of contributing, in a small way, to the benefit of their fellow citizens."

--*Jim S. Harrington*