



2 hurt in stolen-bus chase

Teen surrenders after crashes damage 3 cars

By Joe Hughes

STAFF WRITER

A 16-year-old boy outfitted in a Junior ROTC uniform stole an empty transit bus at an Oak Park shopping center yesterday, then led police on a circuitous hour-long pursuit before he surrendered at a busy Chollas View intersection.

Three cars were damaged in two separate collisions with the County Transit System bus that caused minor injuries to two motorists in National City. No one was seriously hurt, and no extensive property damage occurred, despite the fact that the boy drove through 10 red lights and numerous stop signs.

"We were very lucky this incident wasn't more serious," said San Diego police Capt. Cheryl Meyers, "considering the boy was driving recklessly and with total disregard for safety of others."

During the pursuit over San Diego and National City streets and freeways -- carried live on local television and radio stations and involving a herd of trailing police cars and reporters -- the boy smiled and waved at bystanders as he piloted the 30-foot-long bus through heavy traffic at speeds sometimes exceeding 50 mph.

The teen-ager's name and photos clearly identifying him are not being published, in accordance with *The San Diego Union-Tribune's* policy of identifying juvenile suspects only if they face trial as adults.

The bewildering journey took many twists and turns, coming to an abrupt halt near 47th Street about 11 a.m., when Lt. John Leas got in front of the vehicle as it was eastbound on Market Street and tossed a tire-deflating spike strip on the roadway.

"The boy saw the strip and stopped the bus before he ran over it," Leas said. "I drew my gun, we made eye contact, and he got out with his hands up and hit the ground."

A bystander, Brian Williams, 19, said the boy "stopped when he saw the gun pointed at him, opened the doors, gave a thumbs-up and came out."

After being handcuffed, the boy was taken to police headquarters, where officers described him as tearful and remorseful.

He was then taken to a county mental health facility for evaluation before going to Juvenile Hall, where he was held on suspicion of auto theft, evading police, hit-and-run and driving without a valid California license, said police spokesman Bill Robinson.

The incident was similar to a hijacking of another County Transit System bus at knifepoint Feb. 7, 1997, when a man led police on a two-hour chase through La Mesa and San Diego. Cameron Taylor, 35, was sentenced to four years in prison.

The bus theft yesterday occurred about 9:55 a.m. when a driver on Route 816 ended his run at Market Place at the Grove, on College Grove Drive. He got out of the coach with the engine running to check the odometer, which is over the right rear wheel.

Police said the boy had been riding the bus with other passengers and had exited at the end of the line. He apparently reboarded after the driver left, jumped into the driver's seat and drove away.

"The boy had ridden the route regularly," said police Capt. Meyers. "He had been joking with the driver, asking him what

would happen if he took the bus.

"The driver thought the boy must be joking. He knows the kid; he picks him up every morning."

From Oak Park, the boy took the bus to Allied Gardens, where it was first spotted by police. Then the pursuit was on.

The bus struck a parked and unoccupied 1998 Nissan 200SX at College Avenue and Montezuma Road at 10:10 a.m. It continued through Oak Park, Chollas View, Mount Hope, Lincoln Park and Shelltown into National City, where two cars were struck at Plaza Boulevard and Euclid Avenue. Two drivers suffered minor injuries in that accident.

The bus wound its way to downtown San Diego, then back to Chollas View, where the chase ended.

Police officers initially tried to stop the bus using red lights and sirens, but the boy ignored them. Officers backed off in hopes that the boy would not drive so erratically and that the chance that he would cause harm to others would be reduced.

The boy's mother and grandmother were summoned, and negotiators attempted to put them in touch with the boy via the bus radio telephone. Another plan involved disabling the bus radiator, possibly by gunshots.

The boy, a freshman, had been scheduled to transfer from Morse High School to an alternative education program for troubled youths. He was active in Morse's Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps. He was supposed to have turned in the uniform before switching schools.

He had a history of troubles and discipline problems at Morse, district officials said. He spent his 16th birthday in Juvenile Hall after threatening a teacher, police said.

Neighbors described the boy as a polite, quiet but bored person who often spent his afternoons sitting idly in front of his Encanto home.

"He's a good-natured kid," said Myron Mootry, 33, a neighbor. "I'm not exactly sure what could have driven him to this."

Mootry, a roofer, said that he often saw the boy walking the more than one mile to a Massachusetts Avenue bus stop in neighboring Lemon Grove and that about once a week he would pull over and offer the teen-ager a ride.

He said the boy often wore his Junior ROTC uniform and did not seem to be involved with drugs or alcohol. He said the boy knocked on his door recently and asked whether he could retrieve an archery arrow he had accidentally shot into his back yard.

"I explained that could be real dangerous," the neighbor said.

Another neighbor, Debra Wiggins, 28, a mother of three, said the boy would often wave to her, though they had not introduced themselves.

"He seemed like a nice kid, very polite, almost too polite," Wiggins said.

County transit officials were investigating the bus theft.

Bill Polick, a spokesman for the county Public Works Department, said the driver was following standard procedure when he left the engine running and the door open as he got out to take the odometer reading. However, Polick said the procedure will be reviewed and may be changed.

"The whole procedure of reading the odometer takes about a minute," Polick said. "If the driver were to stop the bus engine, then take a reading, then restart the bus engine, it would take about three to five minutes."

The County Transit System operates the third-largest fleet of buses in the county, with 49, Polick said. It is managed by the Public Works Department and overseen by the Board of Supervisors.

The bus has a range of 440 miles with a full fuel tank. When taken yesterday, the bus had enough fuel to drive roughly 300 miles. Police estimated that the bus went about 50 miles.

Staff writers Mark Arner, Chet Barfield and Maureen Magee contributed to this story.