

Witness to the 'Occupy Oakland' Assault

One week ago, Oakland authorities citing safety hazards from an "Occupy" encampment unleashed a predawn police raid to drive the protesters from a plaza. City officials called the action necessary, but a local security guard emerged to tell Dennis Bernstein a very different story.

By Dennis Bernstein

On Thursday, two days after Oakland police violently routed peaceful protesters occupying a downtown plaza in protest of America's economic inequality, I was approached by Bill Lo, a seasoned security guard and photographer who was on duty directly across the street that night.

He had observed and filmed the entire pre-dawn raid and his compelling, soft-spoken eyewitness account contradicted much of what the police said – and the local corporate media parroted – about what happened at the camp and the supposed dangers that it presented to the city and its residents.

The assault on Oakland's Frank Ogawa Plaza began in the early-morning dark on Tuesday, Oct. 25, as the Oakland Police Department in conjunction, with over 15 other police departments from Northern and Central California, stormed the sleepy Occupy Oakland Encampment.

Asleep inside tents of the makeshift Occupy encampment were over 100 men, women and children. The police force – dressed in black ninja-like outfits and special-forces helmets with full face-shields down and armed with an assortment of the latest riot gear – fired tear gas canisters and concussion grenades into the camp, as helicopters circled above.

Backed by armored vehicles, the police then attacked and ransacked the entire encampment. In a short time, the camp's library, soup kitchen and children's center were left in ruins, and many of the inhabitants were roughed up, arrested and held on high bail. Some activists suffered injuries, including broken bones. One protester, Iraq War vet Scott Olsen, suffered a fractured skull when he was struck in the head by a police projectile.

Interim Police Chief Howard Jordan and Oakland Mayor Jean Quan, who was out of town during the raid, justified the assault on safety and health concerns. The mayor repeatedly claimed that the police acted properly and with restraint in wiping out the camp and arresting the protesters.

The mayor claimed that the police were there to protect property and guarantee the safety of all Oakland's citizens as well as to defend local banks and

businesses that were under attack.

In a statement following the police raid, Quan said, "Over the last week, it was apparent that neither the demonstrators nor the City could maintain safe or sanitary conditions, or control the ongoing vandalism. We want to thank the police, fire, public works and other employees who worked over the last week to peacefully close the encampment.

"I commend [Police] Chief Jordan for a generally peaceful resolution to a situation that deteriorated and concerned our community. His leadership was critical in the successful execution of this operation."

Offering a differing account was security guard Bill Lo, who spoke to me on Pacifica's "Flashpoints" program Monday:

DB: Today on Flashpoints an exclusive eyewitness account of the police savaging of the Occupy Oakland encampment and arresting over a hundred peaceful activists in their heavily armed, pre-dawn raid on that camp last Tuesday in the wee hours.

The testimony comes from a security guard who watched the entire raid from his vantage point on the second floor of a building right across the street from where the police acted.

BL: My name is Bill Lo. I work as a security officer in a high-rise building that's directly across from the Ogawa Plaza. The reason I came to Pacifica, the word Pacifica means peace. And what I witnessed Monday night, I witnessed the raid on the Occupation Oakland, at a little bit after 4:30 in the morning, and it was just an outrage what I saw.

Now from my vantage point, well, initially I started from the lobby, I was able to see all the police gathering in the middle of 14th and Broadway. From the lobby entrance I have a direct view of that. Then, from there I went upstairs to a good vantage point where I was able see everything that happened from the building across the street.

And it was terrifying to see this because, I mean, there were just so many policemen. I mean just the numbers were incredible. And they lined up almost like in a phalanx, on the street, and then they moved in. Now I thought that, I was able to take video of this, so I thought that the video would speak for itself.

There were helicopters flying about and with high beams on the camps. So, you know, the beams were moving across every which way. Young people were waiting at the entrance to the camp; they were prepared to be arrested.

So then, the police did make an announcement over the horn to disperse in a very frightening manner, of course. But the part that was just so appalling was when they moved in, before moving in they shot these, what I, I couldn't tell from a distance, I thought they were smoke bombs, later on I found out that it was tear gas.

Now there were young people in these camps and children, infants in a lot of the tents and this was just, seemed like this was completely out of whack with the situation. These people had demonstrated that their intent was peaceful for the entire two weeks that they were at the camp.

So [the police] shot the tear gas into the middle of the camp, and at the time, there were dumpsters lined up in front, at the entrance, on the corner because the occupiers were trying to conform to the new regulations that the city of Oakland had given to them. So they were trying to get rid of a lot of junk, in the common area.

So the police moved those dumpsters to the side and then they moved to the next stage of taking the barricades and kicking them down. And then they moved in and the first thing they hit was the information tent, and they just started just tearing everything down.

And then they just progressively moved further and further in, and you saw all the people in the middle ground, young people moving every which way, right and left, and you could hear all the voices.

DB: And did they begin to make arrests?

BL: Yes, they did make arrests of the people who were prepared to be arrested.

DB: And did it look like a military action? Was there any. You're sure, there were kids inside?

BL: Well, there were kids who were living in the camp, so they were further in. Make no doubt about it, this was a military type operation, the way they moved in. It harkened back to old footage I had seen of Nazi Germany where you know you had the Nazis, the SS going in and picking up innocent people. It had that tenor.

And even the helicopters, and the lights, and the loud speaker, all those were all intended to create panic and terror for the people inside, and it was totally uncalled for.

DB: And how were the cops dressed and say a little bit more about how they were acting.

BL: It was something like out of a Star Wars movie except instead of being in white they were all in black. You know they were all in riot gear, you know with the visors, they looked like automatons, that they just moved in, in a line.

DB: Having been there for a while, you've observed the process of the camp over several weeks, you were observing, you were in close range, you saw what was going on.

Did you have any sense, as somebody who works there on a regular basis, that this was a violent community, that these were dangerous people that would require this kind of expansive police action, heavily armed, there were helicopters you said flashing lights down.

How would you describe, say a little bit more about who was being arrested?

BL: I tell you downtown Oakland has never been safer because we had a community there. At other times, actually downtown, it's shady, and it's actually very dicey, if you take the chance to walk around.

But violence the thing about the occupiers was that whenever there was an incident, if there was someone who misbehaved themselves, twenty, twenty-five people would surround the person and say "Hey, you know, you can't do this, this is not acceptable behavior at this camp." I saw incidents like that.

I live downtown in Oakland and I saw this thing from its inception on a rainy Monday evening. Five hundred some people gathered at the plaza and the next thing you know they were putting their tents up.

And I attended meetings. I sat in at the amphitheater, everyone was welcome, it was very peaceful, this is the thing I can't emphasize enough. That this was all intended to be peaceful. And anyone who was violent, the group got on them, and said, you know, "This is not acceptable here."

DB: And did you hear the cops say anything? Were there loudspeaker announcements? You said there were helicopters with lights flashing around, spotlights. Vehicles, police vehicles?

BL: Yes, they had these vehicles that looked like armored boxes, black, special riot vehicles.

DB: And, say a little bit more about what was going through your mind as you were watching it, in your city of Oakland.

BL: Well, to tell you the truth, I really, I watched this microcosm develop and [the encampment] was something that was so extraordinarily humane that happened in there the way that they accepted people, homeless people from downtown

Oakland, with open arms. They fed people. They prepared two thousand meals a day. People who lived in neighboring hotels came for free meals.

The kids who were a little rough in behavior actually started behaving themselves because of the peer pressure. Their friends would say, "Hey look, that's not acceptable here, so you have to behave." It was extraordinary, just a friendly positive energy.

And you asked me, yes, the police did make the announcement, "You have so much time to disperse." But the way that it was done, it was like Shock and Awe. I mean something that's terrifying even to hear that.

DB: Did you see any activist committing any types of violence? This was a peaceful resistance, that you are saying?

BL: Absolutely, they were peaceful. But the reason why I wanted to show/present this video was because, thank God, no one was killed. And that's the thing that was an outrage. That this operation didn't have to take place in the dead of night, when it was dark, when there was low visibility. People are still sleeping in tents.

Heaven forbid if someone pulled something out of their pockets and the police said, "Oh, we thought that he pulled out a weapon." Something like that, it's just amazing, that although a lot of people got hurt, there were a lot of broken bones and that kind of thing.

But for [the police] to go into the military fashion against U.S. citizens; young people, old people, infants, you know, young people, it's just outrageous. This is state terrorism without exaggeration. And I was just, I just really couldn't believe that the mayor had actually allowed this to happen.

DB: Anything that comes to mind.

BL: Well, I have to be careful here. This was the acting police chief, is the person that [the mayor] picked. And I attended the summit meeting for combating violence in the city of Oakland the week before, so I know that they work very closely together.

So it really kind of pushes one's credulity that she didn't know, maybe she didn't know specifically what night, this action was going to take place, but I couldn't believe that there wasn't some coordination.

DB: Did you see any protesters attacking police?

BL: That night, on the night of the raid? Absolutely not, absolutely not because the young people who were at the front of the camp were sitting down at the

steps, they were prepared for a raid. We just didn't know when it was going to take place.

So I was down in the lobby, you know, checking every five minutes, and then when the police did appear within four minutes just hundreds of people converged right in the middle of 14th and Broadway, like nothing you've ever seen before.

DB: Now, you are an observer, both as a security person, you work in security, and you're an artist.

BL: Yes, I am, I'm a photographer

DB: Sort of through the senses, what you heard, what you saw, what you were feeling as it was unfolding. Tell us a little bit more about the impact on you as you watched this untold.

BL: Well, I don't want to sound maudlin here, because I had grown to really love OccupyOakland. And when I saw this thing happen, I mean, and when I saw this thing happen I was struggling to hold my little Canon video to shoot this film, because I was just so upset. I know really sounding really sappy, but I was close to tears but I said "No, just you have to control your emotions, because you want to get this video."

And I didn't know, I wasn't thinking that I was going to send the video to any outlet. I was really very, very angry with the way that the corporate media has been presenting this whole thing and the negative spin that they have been putting on this thing is just bogus.

DB: You think that what you've been seeing by the corporate media is essentially a contradiction to what really happened?

BL: It's totally slanted. They take things there might have been certain incidents which they blew out [of proportion]. I mean when you have so many people, from so many different backgrounds you are going to find some people who are out in left field.

There are isolated incidents. But the group, the group tried to control any kind of violence in the camp. And everyone was welcome in there. But when I was shooting I was just trying not to cry, to tell you the truth.

DB: Anything incident/detail that would help us understand better what happened that night.

BL: Well, for the night of the raid I can't really think of anything specific it's just the thing that stays in my mind's eye is in the middle ground with the lights from the helicopters, the police moving in and just stomping on these

tents, and moving in one layer, after another, moving in deeper and deeper, and the young people who really had basically stayed put, but then you can see the movement laterally, to the right, to the left.

It was just like something out of a film, someone told me as I described it to him, people moving around like that. So in this complete chaos it's just amazing, I don't mean to be redundant, it's just amazing that a gun was not pulled out and people were not shot.

DB: Clearly no demonstrators, no protesters, no occupiers pulled out any guns.

BL: No, absolutely not. Absolutely not.

DB: Could you see the different police forces, or they all just looked like one heavily armed force?

BL: All heavily armed. Almost unified, I don't know how they were able to work that out, but that was definitely as a visual, that was definitely an advantage to create that impression.

DB: All looking exactly the same?

BL: It looked like an army of people in black. And anonymous, just like robots, you know, just moving right in. And that's designed to create terror. You know they call it shock and awe. You want to scare the hell out of the people. Why do you want to scare the hell out of these people who are peaceful and trying to do good?

DB: Thank you for sharing all this.

BL: I thank the fact that there is a Pacifica here, because I was not going to take this to the corporate media. You know those people, the occupiers, they welcomed those media people with open arms. They showed all the intimate facets of life in the camps.

But so many reporters are like reptiles, you know, almost like opportunistic. Because then they had a whole different line on what happened here.

DB: And they saw the camp shredded, destroyed in the aftermath, they took them in for the tour. Thank you for sharing this with us. Anything else you might like to say?

BL: I would just say on the sanitation thing and the rats. You know, I live in downtown. The rats were a problem here all the time. When I would come back from San Francisco at night time, I'd pass the plaza, you'd see rats just scurrying across the grass. I mean, really, dozens of these things going around.

The thing that was unfortunate was that, I think, I mean it was a phenomenal feat of organizing that these young people did. I, as an older generation person, you know, I'm 59 years old, I look at that and say wow these young people are really showing up the older generation because they are making possible things here that we almost just dream about. So it was just an enormous thing the way they were able to organize every facet of life at camp.

Dennis Bernstein is host and executive producer of "Flashpoints," an award-winning radio show heard over Pacifica radio and originating from KPFA, 94.1, in Berkeley California. For this interview, <http://www.kpfa.org/archive/id/74680>
