

Published in Daily News on March 11, 1996  
“Training Puts Riders in Charge”

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Published in the  
Santa Clarita Valley

# Daily News

# SANTA CLARITA

EDITION

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MONDAY, MARCH 11, 1996

## Holding their horses



The horses stay in marching formation.

## Training puts riders in charge

By Laurence Darmiento  
*Daily News Staff Writer*

AGUA DULCE — Crowded in a semi-circle inside the muddy corral of the Agua Dulce ranch, the two dozen horses and their riders waited patiently as a Sheriff's Department helicopter slowly approached.

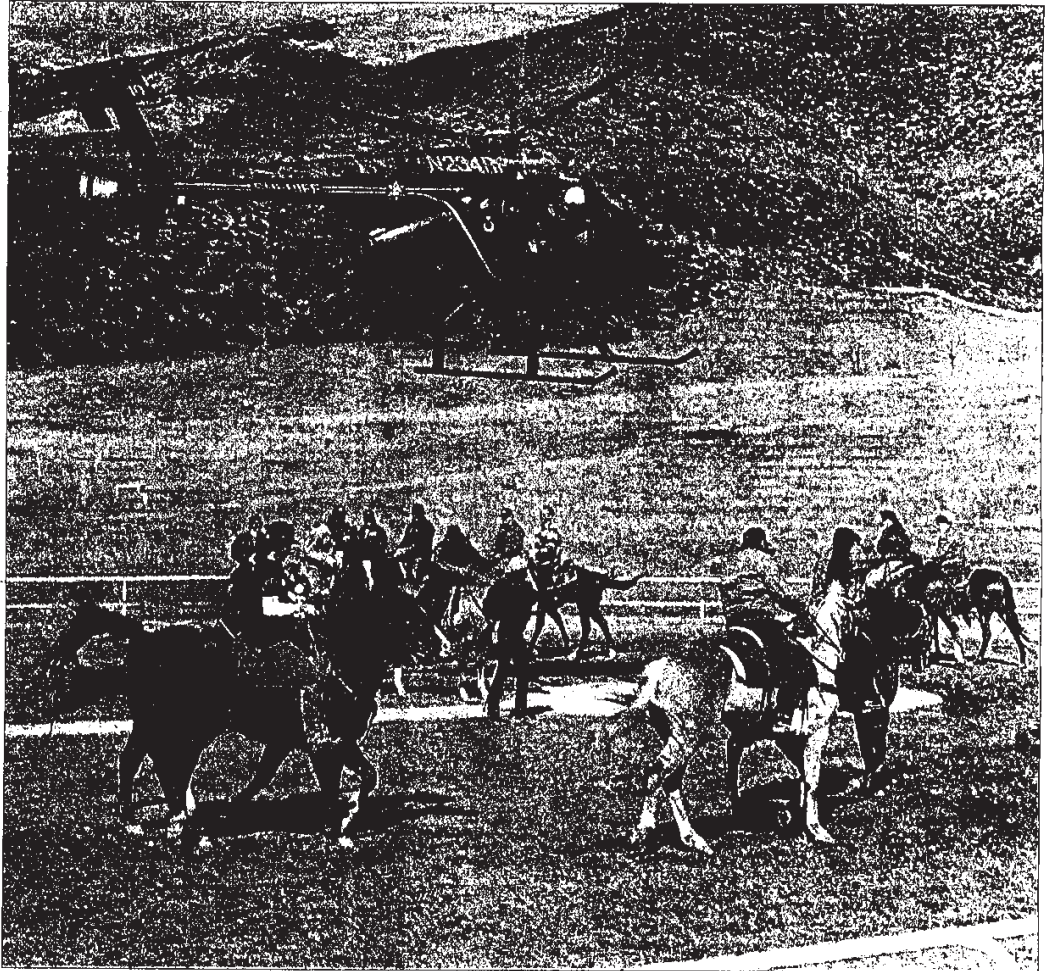
Kicking up dirt and bits of grass, closer and closer the deafening aircraft came, until it hovered almost directly overhead, its landing gear just out of reach of the riders, who were mounted patrol officers.

Just yards away outside the corral, spectators scurried away, with their eyes half shut, in defense against the flying debris.

At ground zero, though, all was calm. A few horses shifted their stances and snorted, but horses and riders stood their ground.

"That's about as intense as it gets."

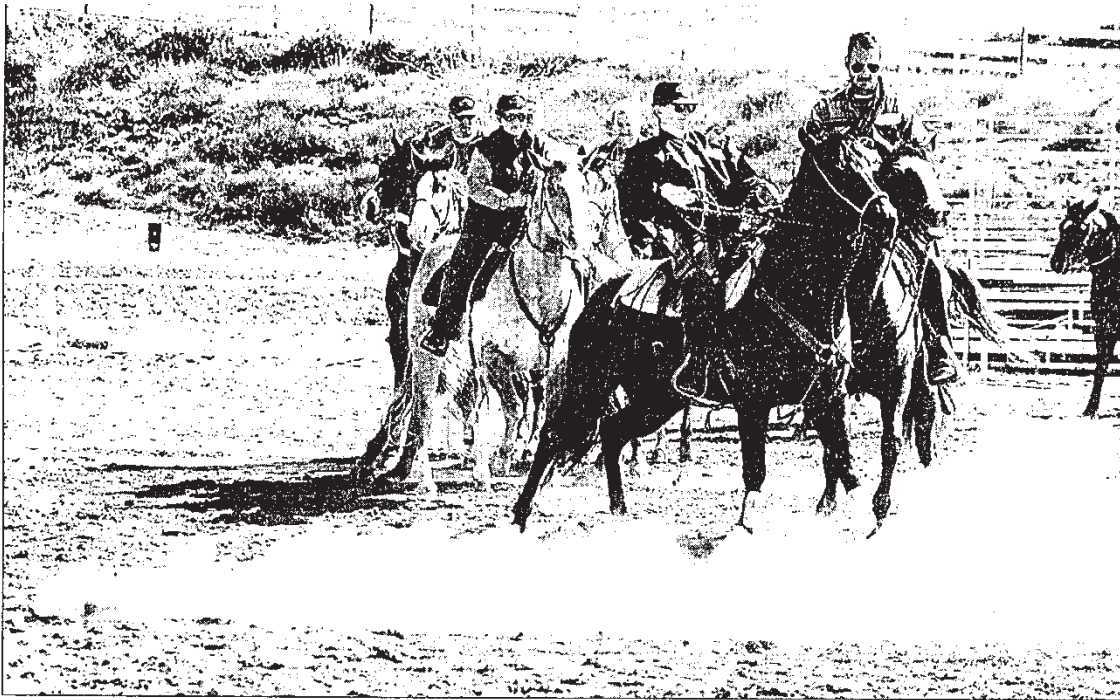
Inglewood police Detective Diane Seymour said afterward. "I have ridden horses all my life and if you had told me six months ago my



Jeff Goldwater/Daily News

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Sheriff's deputies put their four-day training to the test by keeping their horses calm as a noisy helicopter zeroes in overhead.



Jeff Goldwater/Daily News

Deputies keep their mounts under control as a smoke bomb explodes during a Sheriff's Department test.

## Horses taught to stay calm amid chaos

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horse would have stood through that. I would have said, 'No, I don't think so.'

The helicopter stunt was part one of the final exam, which followed four days of training last week in a clinic offered by the Los Angeles County Sheriff Department's Mounted Enforcement Detail.

Led by a Northern California trainer who uses a technique sometimes called New Age Horsemanship, the session showed officers how to control their horses even in the most chaotic circumstances.

"I've been called everything. The Tao of horses. The Zen of horses. You name it," said trainer Dennis Reis, of Penngrove, in Sonoma County, after the commotion had ceased. "The point is you work with the horses' natural instincts."

Reis' technique eschews intimidation, large bits, spurs and other traditional devices used to force a horse to bend to a rider's will.

Instead, horses are gradually exposed to get them used to the uncomfortable stimulus. The horses are rewarded with rest if they do not flee the stimulus, and they are penalized with work routines — such as walking backward — if they do.

"I start by simply waving a flag at the horse and keep pumping up the volume," explained Reis, 37, a former rodeo rider who has trained other department's mounted patrol units.

"People forget. There were times



Teacher Dennis Reis gives the horses a little R & R during the training.

when wars were fought on horseback. The soldier who lived was on the well-trained horse."

Judging from the results, it seems to work.

After the helicopter landed, it was time for the coup de grace — the horses were led around the corral as trainers set off packs of firecrackers, M-80 fireworks and eye-watering smoke bombs.

Spectators cringed and ran from the smoke carried by cold stiff winds. A couple of horses halted and turned circles, but none went ballistic.

"Dennis is exceptional," said Antelope Valley patrol Deputy Sherri Rosten, a member of the department's mounted detail at the clinic.

"He uses the horses' natural

instincts, and teaches human beings how to relate to that. Teach the human being and the horse responds. At this point I would feel comfortable entering any situation they can throw at us."

The training session was the third conducted by Reis for the mounted enforcement detail, a 32-member volunteer unit. About 15 deputies attended, some for the first time, along with officers from other departments.

Deputy David Disbro, the detail's coordinator, said the results of the training were especially impressive since all of the deputies have other primary duties.

"They are ready for anything, and they are only part-time," he said. "It was like Beirut."