

'Went in Like Gestapo': Sonoma Sheriffs' Bloody Rampage in California County Jail

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A federal lawsuit was filed on October 6, demanding damages and relief for prisoners assaulted and tortured by Sonoma County sheriff deputies inside the county jail on May 28, 2015. The plaintiffs, Marqus Martinez and Daniel Banks, were two of at least 20 prisoners viciously beaten in the jail's Administrative Segregation (high security) section on that day. Other abused inmates may join the suit.

At a press conference in Santa Rosa, about 60 miles north of San Francisco, attorney Isaak Schwaiger announced the legal action, and described the actions of the deputies: "Dressed in black, wearing black body armor, black ski masks and without badges, they went in like the Gestapo. From one module to the other end they carried on the beatings for five-and-a-half hours. Some prisoners were beaten four times."

Joining Schwaiger at the speakers table were Laurie Banks, mother of Daniel Banks, and Karina Arango Lopez, sister of Jesus Lopez, who received particularly extreme and prolonged torture.



Attorney Isaak Schwaiger, Karina Arango Lopez, Laurie Banks Oct. 6 press conference
Photo: Richard Becker

Laurie Banks read from a letter from her son, who was in the last cell attacked: "Mom I knew they were coming, they were going down the line." She continued, "he was scared for his life. He had no idea how bad the beatings were."

The assaults came to light as a result of inmates informing their attorneys of what had taken place. The attorneys urged their clients to write down their accounts of what had taken

place in the jail on May 28. The letters were later forwarded to Schwaiger who is known in the area for a lawsuit he filed last December for a man tasered 23 times by Sonoma County deputies. The original letters were displayed at the press conference.

Sonoma County Sheriffs' Department, Santa Rosa Police Department and other police agencies in Sonoma County are infamous for their records of killings and abuse. As far back as 1999, the U.S. Civil Rights Commission held hearings in Santa Rosa and recommended that a civilian review board be created.

The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors have declined to take any such action, even after the murder of 13-year-old Andy Lopez by Sonoma sheriff's deputy Gelhaus in October 2013.

The office of Sheriff Steve Freitas predictably denied all allegations of torture and beatings, and claimed that the deputies were responding to a "riot that interfered with the safety of the jail." What makes this claim ridiculous on its face is the fact that all the assaulted inmates were locked in individual cells, except for the times when they were dragged out for more abuse.

The sheriff has so far refused release videos which reportedly showed the beatings.

Schwaiger stated, "If he wants to call them [the abused inmates] liars then show me that video and I'll be very happy to withdraw the lawsuit and walk away."

He said that he believes "there are several hundred videos" at the jail documenting similar events.

The following are excerpts of a press release from the office of Attorney Isaak Schwaiger, with graphic descriptions of some of the abuse suffered by prisoners on May 28, drawn from the federal court filing.

A federal complaint filed today by the Law Office of Izaak Schwaiger on behalf of two Sonoma County men charges the County of Sonoma, Sheriff Steve Freitas, and other named Deputies with violations of the U.S. Constitution for heinous and inexplicable beatings of more than twenty inmates on May 28, 2015 in the Sonoma County Main Adult Detention Facility in Santa Rosa, CA.

The allegations set forth in the complaint describe in minute specificity the unconscionable events of May 28th, perpetrated by Sonoma County Deputy Sheriffs and ratified by Sonoma County Sheriff Steve Freitas.

They grabbed Montes and threw him to the ground, handcuffed him, then slammed his head into the floor, striking several rapid and violent blows about his head, shoulders, neck, and back. One deputy kicked Montes in the head. Another deployed a taser against the inmate. Deputies then removed Montes from the unit to administer "yard-counseling," a practice that is common in the jail and routinely involves the application of physical violence to inmates. Deputies dressed in all black wearing ski masks dragged Montes to the shower, ordered him to strip naked, and told the inmate he was their "bitch." While naked and defenseless, deputies threw Montes to the ground and began another round of savage beatings...

...deputies then began a third round of violent beatings, punching and kicking

Lopez and smashing his face into the concrete. As the beatings continued, the lieutenant told Lopez that he was to blame for the violence. Lopez cried that they were treating him worse than an animal. The response from the deputies was swift. Lopez felt an unknown deputy punch the back of his neck and other deputies began punching, kicking, and body-slammng Lopez to the point of involuntary defecation. They placed shackles around Lopez's feet and attached them through his handcuffs to a chain secured around his waist. A mask was put over his head and Deputy Medeiros began bashing his face into the floor. The deputies dragged Lopez to the mental health unit and stripped him naked. Covered in his own feces, Lopez pleaded for toilet paper. The deputies ignored his pleas, laughed at him, and locked him naked in isolation covered in his own feces for two days...

...Martinez repeatedly called for medical assistance for over an hour with no response. Due to his injuries, he was unable to pick himself up off the floor where the deputies left him. For two more hours he listened to screams of pain and torture from the other inmates as jail staff proceeded down the tier, removing each individual from his cell and subjecting him to similar beatings. Laying on the floor unable to move, Martinez heard his door open again. Hoping that it was the doctor, the inmate looked up just in time to see the SERT team returning to his cell wearing all black, with their nametags removed and ski masks covering their faces. They entered his cell and attacked him with overwhelming force, kicking, punching, and kneeing him and knocking his head into the floor. They called him a "bitch" and "a piece of shit." They spat on him and threatened to continue the beatings if he were to ever yell out again...

While the housing module filled with the screams of other inmates, Daniel Banks, laid face down on his mattress with his hands behind his back. For hours he had listened to the beatings all around him. He hoped that by his show of submission he would avoid being beaten as well, but the deputies merely saved him for last. His cell door opened and four deputies wearing black entered the small cell. All but one was wearing a ski mask. The four deputies jumped on top of him and began kneeing and punching him in the back and wrenching his arms above his head, causing him excruciating pain. The deputies yelled, "stop resisting!" and smashed a pair of handcuffs around his wrists, causing the metal to cut into him and leaving him with bruising, swelling, permanent nerve damage and pain. Though face down, Banks turned to see his tormenters, and observed that one was not wearing a ski mask. He brought his face close to Banks' and yelled, "That's right - get a good look at me, you punk bitch - This is our house!" and spit in his face. The deputies brought Banks out of his cell, down the stairs, and into the yard where the beating continued...

Santa Rosa criminal defense and civil rights attorney Izaak Schwaiger received more than twenty letters from inmates following the beatings. A former prosecutor and Marine Corps veteran of the Iraq War, Schwaiger called the systematic assaults on the prisoners "gut-wrenching" and "beyond the pale." Schwaiger's early investigation reveals that jail staff videotaped a large portion of the beatings, and that those videos are in the possession of the Sonoma County Sheriff. "This is like a horror movie," said Schwaiger. "And we have reason to believe this was not an isolated incident."

The complaint seeks unspecified damages and injunctive relief.

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