

# Witnesses Depict Relentless Beating

■ **Police:** Accounts of Rodney Glen King's arrest describe repeated striking and kicking of the suspect. LAPD officers said King's actions justified the treatment.

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Rodney King's white Hyundai came to a stop on a busy San Fernando Valley street in front of a sprawling apartment complex.

It was 12:30 a.m. Sunday, and the flashing lights of several patrol cars illuminated the scene. A police helicopter circled overhead, and its thumping sound began to draw tenants to their windows. At least one of them reached for a home video camera.

In the next few minutes, King would be surrounded by at least a dozen Los Angeles police officers, some of whom beat him fiercely. The officers apparently were unaware they were being recorded on videotape.

The officers involved would report later that the beating was justified by King's threatening actions in the first seconds when he emerged from his car.

The videotape—which was broadcast nationally and fueled a public outrage—did not capture these first moments. But eyewitnesses who watched the beating later contradicted the officers' accounts.

What follows is a reconstruction of the brief but furious incident. It is based on interviews with eyewitnesses, investigators and others involved in the case.

It began on the westbound lanes of the Foothill Freeway, where King and two passengers—known to King's attorneys only as "Junior" and "Poo"—were speeding through Sun Valley, heading away from his Altadena home.

According to a California Highway Patrol report, King passed a patrol car at about 115 m.p.h., but then slowed to 80 m.p.h. after passing. The CHP officers, a husband-and-wife team named T.J. and Melanie Singer, gave chase, flashing red lights at the Hyundai, which slowed down but did not stop, said CHP spokesman Sgt. Mike Brey.

King would later tell a parole officer that he didn't stop because he feared that a speeding ticket would jeopardize his parole, sending him back to prison. He was convicted last year of second-degree robbery.

In a televised press conference before his release from jail, King acknowledged: "I may have been speeding, just a little bit."

The car left the freeway at Paxton Street, rolling through a stop sign at the bottom of the off-ramp at about 50 m.p.h., according to police accounts. The CHP officers were entering the jurisdiction of the Los Angeles Police Department, Brey said, and the Highway Patrol officer radioed the LAPD, which took up the chase.

King proceeded through surface streets, running red lights at speeds of up to 80 m.p.h., Brey said. The Hyundai finally stopped in the 11700 block of Foothill Boulevard, on a four-lane stretch of the road. On one side of the road was a sprawling, two-story apartment complex; on the other, Hansen Dam Recreation Area, notorious locally as a drug-dealing haven.

According to Brey, as the patrol cars came to a stop, the LAPD officers told the Highway Patrol officers that they would handle the arrest. One law enforcement source said an LAPD sergeant told the Highway Patrol officers, in effect, to "step out, we'll take it."

At the Mountainback Apartments on Foothill Boulevard, Sylvia Sales said she heard a voice over a loudspeaker that said, "Pull over at the light or you'll get hurt."

Another tenant, Josie Morales, 26, a service representative for the Department of Water and Power, was awakened by the noise. She and her husband, Heriberto, moved to their balcony and stood on a lawn chair, watching as the incident unfolded.

King's car and at least five police cars had come to a stop, Morales said. For a moment, no one in the cars moved.

A muffled shout from a police officer followed, Morales said.

According to a law enforcement source, King acted oddly but in a non-threatening manner when he got out. He looked up at the helicopter lights and began to laugh, the source said.

King stepped out and put his hands on the roof of his car. "He never moved his hands," Morales said. "Then I heard another voice yell. . . . The driver [King] moved away from the car and laid down. . . . He lay there 30 seconds more."

King later would recall a police officer telling him to place his hands on the windshield, then ordering him to open the door with his left hand.

"I got out of the car and I laid down," King said. "They said, 'Face down on the pavement. . . . I laid down.'"

Morales watched as about a dozen police officers surrounded King. A few other officers were standing near their vehicles.

As King lay on his back, Morales said, one officer fired a shot at him from what apparently was a Taser stun gun, which transmits a powerful electrical charge into a suspect. The shot from the gun struck King on the chest, leaving a burn scar that he displayed to reporters Wednesday.

The officer who fired the gun began hitting King with a nightstick, Morales said. After being struck several times, King tried to get up and two other officers began to strike him as well.

Morales then noticed neighbors out on their balconies. Next door, George Holliday brought out his new video camera and began taping. By that point, Morales said, the beating had already been going on for at least three minutes.

About 10 other witnesses offered similar, though slightly varying accounts to Times reporters. One witness, Dawn Davis, reported seeing 10 officers pointing their guns at the car. None of the witnesses said they saw King fight back after the beating began.

Davis, 26, said she heard one officer yell, "Fighting!" Six of the officers then wrestled King to the ground and began to hit him with their batons.

"He was face down and he wasn't fighting or anything," Davis said, "and then they were still hitting on him."

Two or three officers carried on the beating, Davis said, interrupted only by a plainclothes officer who tried to stop them. Davis said he was shoved aside.

"We heard a cop say, 'Put your hands behind your back' and every time he'd move, they'd hit him again," she said. "I was crying. I was praying for the guy. . . ."

King said the beating began after he was shot by the stun gun.

"They struck me across the face with a billy club after I was laying face down with my hands tied," King said.

It does not appear on Holliday's videotape that King's hands are tied.

The tape begins with King on his knees as he receives 10 quick blows from an officer's baton. It shows about a dozen officers gathered around King, watching. King begins to stand up and lifts an arm, somewhat meekly it appears, in an attempt to ward off the blows. King then tumbles to the ground, falling on his stomach, as the officers continue to deliver blows against the back of his legs. King rolls over onto his back, and one officer strikes him across the midsection with a baton.

Throughout the tape, one officer

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holds a long metal wire that appears to be attached to King—most likely a line from a Taser stun gun.

King rises to his knees again, and an officer delivers several quick blows with a baton across his back. One officer kicks King, who falls to the ground. Another officer then stomps on King's neck, but King rises to his knees again.

In all, the officers hit the man at least 40 times on the tape. Finally, about six officers converge on King, and one appears to place handcuffs on him.

Witnesses said that as the beating unfolded, roughly 20 tenants stepped out of their apartments to watch. Some on the ground floor peered through a security fence. On the street, traffic slowed as drivers tried to see what was going on. Police had to urge them to drive on.

One woman, who asked not to be identified, said that two girls stood in front of the apartment and began to scream: "Oh my God, they're beating him to death. . . . What are they going to do, kill him?"

Dorothy Gibson, a 52-year-old nurse, said she heard King cry out: "Please stop, please stop."

Said another witness, who asked not to be identified: "They weren't beating him to subdue him; it was like they were really angry. One in particular kept hitting him and hitting him. The others just backed away."

Written reports submitted afterward by the officers told a much different story. According to LAPD Detective Richard Talkington, who reviewed the reports as part of his investigation into the initial traffic stop, the officers reported that King refused requests to exit the vehicle. When he finally stepped out of the car, King placed his left hand in his pants pocket, causing the officers to fear he may have a weapon.

The reports said King lay on the ground and attempted to stand up while being handcuffed, causing an officer to fall to the ground. A fight between King and the officers ensued, the report said.

King charged at the officers, the report said, and kicked and swung at them, even after they fired a Taser gun at him.

On Wednesday, King denied having fought the officers. "I wouldn't strike back. I don't think no one would strike back against four or five guns aimed at him."

Eventually, the reports said, King was subdued by the officers. Paramedics were summoned and King was transported to a Sun Valley hospital.

King would later tell his attorney, Robert Rentzer, that moments after the beating stopped he thought he must be dead because

some officers had taken a sheet and thrown it over his head. King, according to Rentzer, said he wondered: "If this is what it is being dead, why do I feel this way?"

A second apartment tenant videotaped the incident in its latter stages. The tape shows King on the ground with his arms tied behind his back and officers milling about as they wait for an ambulance.

King was bleeding badly when he arrived at Pacifica Hospital of the Valley. Dr. Antonio Mancina, an emergency room physician, treated him. The doctor said he was startled by the injuries, which included a large bruise to the chest. King also had numerous cuts to the face requiring 20 stitches, including five on the inside of his mouth.

"I was surprised there were so many lacerations," Mancina said. "There were so many lacerations I gave him intravenous fluids and antibiotics" to prevent infections and help with his blood loss.

"I asked if he had fallen or what had happened," Mancina said. King did not answer, but police officers responded that King was high on PCP, according to Mancina.

"But it didn't look like drugs to me," the doctor added. "He was very quiet . . . very cooperative . . . not aggressive. He was a very good patient to take care of."

Mancina said that after he treated King—stitching him up, checking his blood pressure and administering the intravenous fluids and antibiotics—the patient was transferred to County-USC Medical Center.

Back on Foothill Boulevard, witnesses said that after the ambulance left and the police cars drove off, one police officer remained with King's Hyundai until a tow truck came and hauled it away. For the apartment building tenants, the incident was over. In all, it had lasted about 30 minutes.

At about 1:15 a.m., Josie Morales and her husband went to bed. Neither was able to sleep all night, she said.

"We were so disturbed by it, we couldn't do anything," she said. "I was just numb. I lay in bed and thought about what had happened. If it could happen to him, it could happen to anybody."

The next day, figuring they would be questioned about what they had seen, they wrote it all down. So far, no investigator has asked for their version of the events.

Times staff writers Ashley Dunn, John Johnson and Claire Spiegel contributed to this report.