

Command Post Grim: Policemen

By JACK DEMPSEY

Policemen armed with high-powered rifles line the tops of nearby buildings.

Other police marksmen, all volunteers, circle above in a helicopter.

Still other officers are crouched on the upper floors of the Downtown Howard Johnson's — directly below heavily armed snipers who have held off police through a long cold day and well into the night.

THE MASSIVE police operation is directed by a battle-tested Marine veteran of World War II.

It is a sad command post that Police Supt. Clarence B. Giarrusso commands. At least three of his fellow policemen are dead from sniper fire.

Many others are injured. Among the dead is Louis Sirgo, the man Giarrusso chose as his second in command when he became New Orleans' top policeman in 1970.

Giarrusso, in direct radio contact with all segments of the police operation, remains calm in a situation not given to calmness.

While the superintendent is

as anxious as any other policeman on the force to get to the snipers, he repeatedly reminds officers of the necessity for caution.

"THERE ARE still plenty of people in this building," he radios to the marksmen in the helicopter above. "Don't fire promiscuously. If you are directly on top of them, pinpoint your fire."

On many occasions Giarrusso had to call on his anxious officers for restraint. "Hold your fire," he warned. "There are policemen in this building. Make sure of your line of fire. You on the ground do not fire. Fire only upon my command."

Young police officers, many of them veterans of the Vietnam war, are much in evidence as they scurry through the command post in the hotel lobby. Some pick up flak vests. Others pick up additional ammunition or batteries for their radios.

Giarrusso, whose radio call is Car Two, remains in constant touch with the overall situation. He is joined in the command post by Mayor Moon Landrieu, Chief Admin-

istrative Officer Richard Ker-nion and other city officials, fire department leaders and high-ranking police officers.

WHEN THE Marine helicopter, manned by police sharpshooters, prepared to make its first pass over the roof of the building, Giarrusso had officers atop the nearby Rault Center open a volley of diversionary fire on the snipers.

"Open fire at them when I give the word," he instructed Lt. Roger Bacon at the Rault Center. "A helicopter is going to make a pass. Keep them busy on the roof."

Within seconds the chopper was overhead.

"Open fire," commanded Giarrusso.

EVERYONE IN the command post then heard a rapid burst of gunfire. The snipers were getting hot lead from two sources — across narrow Gravier Street and from above.

Giarrusso had the entire 18th floor sealed off. The snipers were huddled on the roof — or 19th floor directly above — in a small concrete cubicle.

Lt. Richard Hunter, Capt. Norris Randle, Capt. Curtis Gaudet and a host of detectives, tactical squad officers and others were making sure the snipers could not escape via a stairwell.

The unidentified voices on the radio transmissions to the command post confirmed the presence of more than one sniper.

AS THE helicopter made its third sortie on the snipers, someone transmitted: "They (snipers) fired three times at the chopper!"

Still another: "We can hear at least two and possibly three persons yelling and cursing after the chopper went by!"

Policemen firing from large-caliber weapons had

carved a good-sized hole in the area in which the snipers were entrenched.

Police marksmen lobbed tear gas shells directly through the hole, showing fine marksmanship.

EITHER THE snipers had gas masks or were resolute in their determination to remain in the safety of their concrete cubicle, but in any case they continued to fire each time the helicopter made a pass overhead.

At 7:15 p.m. Giarrusso and his top aides began mapping

Do Their Duty, Mourn the Fallen

personnel radioed the command post they had been hit and would land to check possible damage.

A short time later came the hoped-for radio message from the chopper:

"The fire didn't strike anything vital. We can take off again!"

The command post, however, sent for the pilot and crew members for new briefings. These briefings were to be in person, just in case the snipers had stolen radios.

AT 9:30 P.M. the Marine helicopter was once again airborne.

One of the snipers was hit and dropped his lethal .44-magnum rifle.

"If he comes back for that weapon, he won't make it alive," boasted a police marksman with a star-scope who witnessed what had occurred. The sniper never came back. Police later reported he had been killed during the helicopter pass.

During the interim, weary policemen, many of whom had been on the scene since 11 a.m., trod through the command post area. Some munched on sandwiches, while others sipped hot coffee.

THESE WERE brave, resolute policemen-turned-soldiers.

Many inquired about the condition of brother officers felled by the snipers.

To a man they were shocked about the news of the killing of their beloved "chief" Louis Sirgo.

HERE WAS a leader who had retired, and then responded to a second call to duty, this time to assume the position of second in command of the department.

He once played the role of "Beau Jack" on a TV series, "NOPD."

Lt. Albert J. Oestricher remembered him well. They

were graduates of the first police academy class, many of whom were World War II veterans.

Oestricher remarked about the unusual parallel between Chief Sirgo's death and that of his own father, Patrolman Albert E. Oestricher, who was felled by a gunman's bullet March 9, 1932.

"**THE SHOOTING** occurred at the old 12th Precinct station," recalled Lt. Oestricher who was just a boy at the time. "Two officers had been shot and wounded on the roof of the building and when my father went out to aid them he, too, was cut down."

"History has a strange way of repeating itself. Chief Sirgo was going to the aid of a wounded brother officer, and he, too, was shot down and killed."

Ptn. Frank Miller was among the many officers who experienced "close calls" with death.

He was rushing additional ammunition and batteries to the hotel site, and while driving on South Rampart the snipers opened fire.

"**I COUNTED** three or four shots," said Miller, "and believe me, that was too close for comfort."

Ironically, it was one of the few times the snipers missed their mark. They seemed to be deadly accurate throughout the afternoon and night.

Conjecture was rampant about the identity of the snipers — or at least as to their background.

"One thing for sure," said one veteran officer, "when the truth is finally known, you'll find they were all ex-combat servicemen."

"And I'll tell you one more thing. When they finally run out of ammunition, they'll save one last bullet each — for themselves."

new strategies with the aid of the building engineer, who pointed out vantage points from architect-type maps of the building's rooftop.

Lt. Jake Schnapp, Lt. Edward O'Donnell and Ptn. John Evans, who had been firing on the snipers earlier from vantage points across the street, joined in the strategy talks, offering suggestions based on the experiences they had endured.

At 8:15 p.m. the helicopter made three more "runs" at the snipers. Once again they drew return fire.

MANY OF the men passing

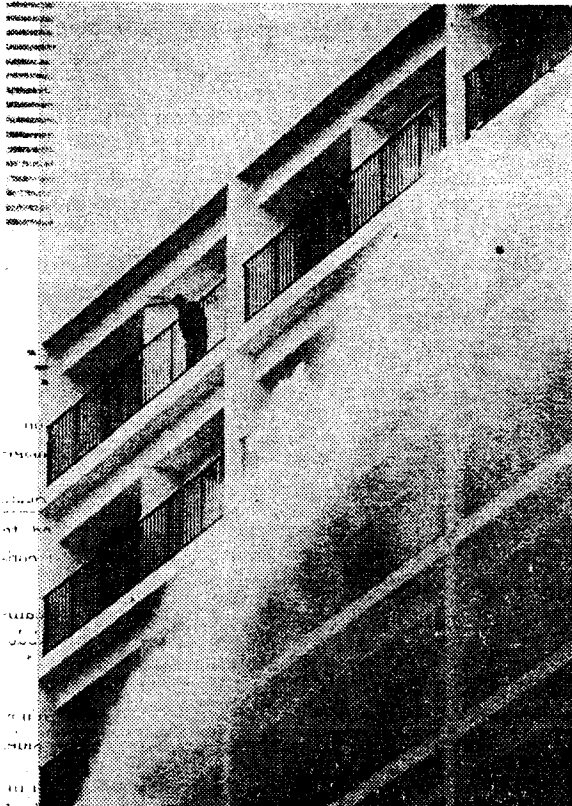
through the command post expressed amazement about the amount of ammunition the snipers possessed on the rooftop bastion.

At 8:45 p.m. the Marine chopper went aloft again.

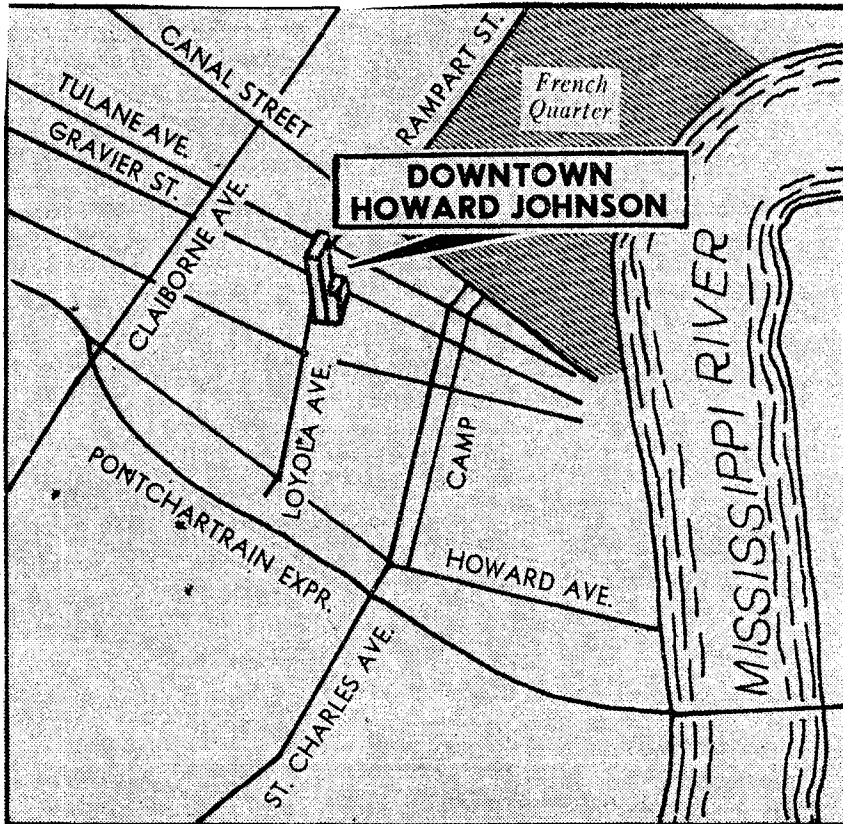
State police officials offered to bring in a second helicopter from Sorrento, one with a large light they said would illuminate the entire area.

The offer was declined as the Marine pilot expressed concern over the safety of two choppers hovering in the same area together.

ABOUT 9 P.M. helicopter



—AP photo.
AN OCCUPANT STANDS ON BALCONY of the
18th floor of the Downtown Howard Johnson's
Motor Lodge awaiting rescue during sniper fire
yesterday.



—States-Item photo by William Haber.
LOCATION OF SHOOTOUT IN CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT