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DAILY NEWS

THE PEOPLE PAPER

YO!

**HISPANIC
FOOD IS
HOT, HOT, HOT**

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HARASSED, FRIGHTENED ME**

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“I had no control over any situation.

It was just eight hours a day of them just pounding on me. It was like I was a hostage or a prisoner of war. They wanted to take away all my dignity.”

NANCY DREW SUDERS



STEVEN M. FALK/Daily News

SHE GIVES TROOP G ‘R’ RATING

EX-DISPATCHER’S SUIT CLAIMS STATE POLICE BOSSES WERE LEWD, SCARY

By **NICOLE WEISENSEE EGAN**
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NANCY DREW SUDERS was no wide-eyed rookie when she began working as a dispatcher at her local state police barracks in March 1998.

The 54-year-old grandmother had been a deputy sheriff in south-central Pennsylvania’s Fulton County for 10 years. She’d carried a gun, arrested criminals and hauled prisoners to and from court. She had broken gender barriers as the first female deputy in county history.

None of that prepared her for what she said she encountered at Troop G, McConnellsburg, in Fulton. In a lengthy, emotional interview with the *Daily News* earlier this month, Suders said that a trio of supervisors created an atmosphere so thick with testosterone, raunchy behavior and bawdy talk that the barracks was more like “Animal House” than it was a police station.



Cpl. William D. Baker



Sgt. Eric Easton



Cpl. Eric Prendergast

“My prisoners don’t talk like they talked,” said Suders, now 59. “It was degrading. It was humiliating.”

For their part, the supervisors say Suders simply was incompetent. Eventually, she resigned after she was accused of rifling through drawers at the station. No charges were filed against her.

Here are the conflicting descriptions of the behavior of her three bosses, based on inter-

views and depositions in the federal sexual-harassment and discrimination lawsuit that she filed against the state police:

► Suders said Cpl. William D. Baker was a pro-wrestling buff who frequently grabbed his crotch and bellowed, “Suck it!” — doing his rendition of a move made popular by De-

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IN A NUTSHELL

FROM 1995 through 2001, Pennsylvania State Police investigated 163 sexual-misconduct charges against troopers, Commissioner Jeffrey Miller said. Eighty-nine of those investigations have been disclosed to lawyers representing people who have filed civil-rights lawsuits against the department and a former trooper, Michael K. Evans, now serving a prison sentence for sex crimes. Forty-seven of those cases were made public earlier this month when a federal judge unsealed the documents.

In 14 of the 47 internal-affairs investigations that have been made public, cops were disciplined for their conduct. In the 33 other cases, the charges were unproven, withdrawn or unfounded.

The sexual-misconduct charges ranged from troopers watching pornographic videos in their barracks to rape — a charge that internal-affairs investigators didn’t sustain.

One case involved a cop who stuck a carrot up his butt, then ate it, in front of fellow troopers. Others involved cops having sex in police cars, and cops having sex with informants.



STEVEN M. FALK/Daily News

Ex-Pa. Auditor General Don Bailey (above) is representing Suders.

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generation X of World Wrestling Entertainment.

In his deposition for Suders' suit, Baker admitted that he was a wrestling fan but denied ever performing the move. He declined to comment when contacted by the *Daily News*.

➤ Sgt. Eric Easton, the barracks commander and close friend of State Police Commissioner Jeffrey Miller, frequently talked about people having sex with animals and once said fathers should teach their daughters how to perform oral sex, Suders said.

In Easton's deposition for the lawsuit and in an interview, he said that bestiality talk could have come up in the course of routine police work. In his deposition, he denied making the oral-sex comment.

➤ Cpl. Eric Prendergast would wear black gloves with the fingers cut out, smacking his fist into his palm repeatedly while he glared at her, Suders said. He told her that he didn't trust her and said "he was going to watch me every shift the whole time," she said.

He also said that Suders, a Republican committee woman who had first heard about the dispatcher job from the Fulton County party chairman, was the "last political appointee" who would work at the barracks, she said.

In a recent interview, Prendergast called Suders' accusations against him "outrageous, unsubstantiated and salacious." He denied her claims about the gloves and hand gestures, and said that he never watched her constantly during her shifts.

He said that Suders had misrep-

resented what he said to her about her political connections during a counseling session. He said that Suders had told him troopers at the station did not like her because of her political ties. "I told her I can't influence what the troopers say or think about you, whether it's true or not," he said. "What you have to do is you have to show you are competent and able to do the job."

The three men all said in their depositions that Suders had been having a difficult time learning her job:

➤ Baker said he had reprimanded her "numerous times" for mistakes she made and for being late to work. He also described her as "very suspicious" and "a very meticulous, very conniving woman."

➤ Easton said "several troopers approached me during the course of her probationary employment [and said] that they did not feel safe with her as a communications operator, and they did not feel she was doing a good job."

➤ Prendergast said "we felt her performance was poor" and "she wasn't coming around, and the training and information that was being given to her she wasn't grasping."

Suders said those criticisms were "lies" and part of the harassment they heaped on her day after day.

"Every shift they changed the rules," she said. "Different supervisors told me different ways to do the same tasks. Then they'd jump on me for not doing it right."

In August 1998, after five months on the job that ended with what Suders said was a trumped-up theft accusation against her, she quit.

"I had no control over any situation," said Suders, a petite wom-



Associated Press

Suders worked in this state police barracks in McConnellsburg (see map below) for only five months.



an with blue eyes and short, graying, curly hair. "It was just eight hours a day of them just pounding on me. It was like I was a hostage or a prisoner of war. They wanted to take away all my dignity."

Her case is not among the 89 sexual-misconduct complaints that were investigated by the state police from 1995 to 2001 and that were disclosed through a federal lawsuit earlier this month. In fact, the state police's internal-affairs process is so flawed, it's not clear whether Suders' case ever was investigated, said her attorney, Don Bailey, a former state auditor general.

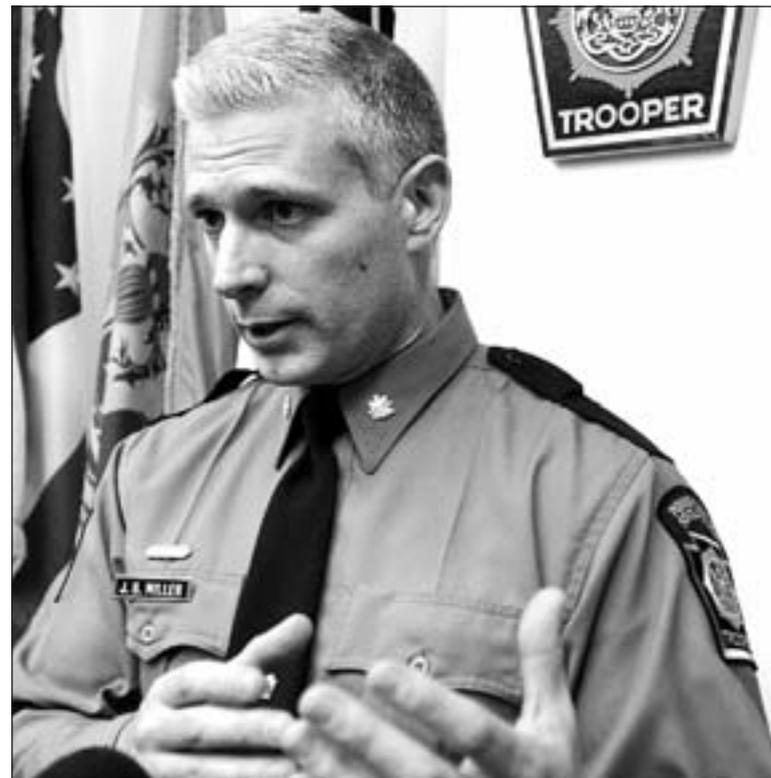
"The Pennsylvania State Police needs an enema from the top down," he said. "This buddy-buddy clique needs to be cleaned out."

Suders said she's been following the recent publicity about the sexual-misconduct complaints with great interest. It has confirmed her belief that what she says she experienced goes on in barracks across the state every day. It is why she agreed to talk now, her first interview about her case.

"I say, 'No more,'" she said. The Pennsylvania State Police "have

WHAT'S YOUR STORY?

Do you have a story to tell about possible abuses by the Pennsylvania State Police? Call staff writer Nicole Weisensee Egan at 215-854-5922, or e-mail her at weisenn@phillynews.com



Associated Press

State Police Commissioner Jeffrey B. Miller, shown when he was nominated in January to head the force, refused comment on suit.

to be stopped. They cannot continue to do this to people. They are hiding behind their badges and will continue to do this as long as people remain silent."

Inside the station

Suders applied to be a police communications operator at the McConnellsburg barracks in November 1997. The job paid about \$26,000 per year — almost twice what she was making as a deputy

sheriff — and the health-insurance benefits covered her husband, Morris, who owned his own auto-repair garage at the time.

She started work March 23, 1998, with two other dispatchers. Her bosses' outrageous behavior, she said, began about two weeks later, after she started working on her own.

Suders said Baker would stride into the communications room

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where she worked, cross his hands in front of his crotch, grab his penis and yell, "Suck it!"

"Then he'd yell, 'Hell yeah! Give me one of these!' " she said, her face reddening. "I told him he'd never see me do something like that. That's all this guy did. He'd do it five or 10 times a shift. When I told him he shouldn't do it, it just got worse. He just did it that much more.

"One night he came out and said, 'I didn't give you one of these yet,' and he did it. He always laughed. He thought it was funny."

Suders' former boss, Fulton County Sheriff John Pittman, said Baker once performed the crotch-grabbing move in front of him while he was at the barracks on business.

"I was shocked," said Pittman, a sheriff for 16 years, in a recent interview. "It's inappropriate. I didn't think it was funny."

Prendergast, in his deposition and in an interview, said he had seen Baker perform the move once, shortly after he transferred to McConnellsburg in April 1998. Baker said in his deposition that he had never performed the move.

Suders said Easton had been preoccupied with bestiality and would insert the topic into virtually any private conversation they had, including during her two performance reviews.

"Out of the clear blue he'd say, 'You know, people have sex with animals.' And then he'd elaborate — they have sex with pigs and cows, and things like that," she said.

Easton said in an interview that he may have mentioned sex with animals to Suders.

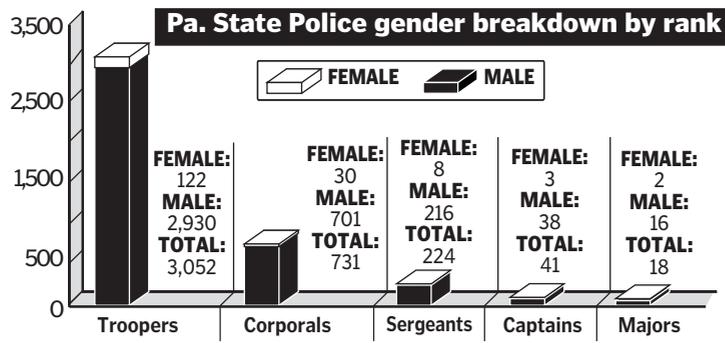
"A part of the training process involves discussing a variety of elements of a variety of crimes, and some of the elements of crimes you have to talk about are sexual in nature," he said. "So there could have been discussions of the elements of sexual crimes, but there would have been no sexual discussions outside of what was necessary for training purposes.

"There are offensive aspects of police work, and they can't be avoided," he added. "But nothing offensive was directed toward her, and that's really the best way I can say it."

Another time Easton stood in the doorway of an office not far from her desk and launched into

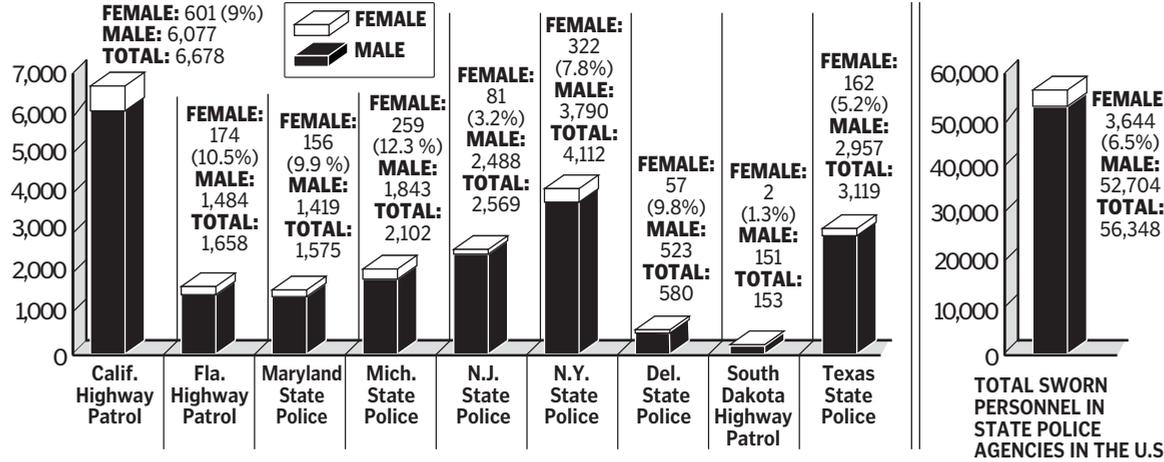
IN THE RANKS

A low percentage of women cops, especially among commanders, creates an environment ripe for sex scandal, experts say. The Pennsylvania State Police has among the lowest percentages of women of all big law-enforcement agencies nationwide.



SOURCE: Pennsylvania State Police - July 2003

Police across the nation



SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics - June 2000

a discussion with Prendergast about sex, she said.

"Easton said, 'If someone has a daughter, I think they ought to teach her how to give a blow job,' " she recalled. "Prendergast started laughing and Easton said, 'I'm serious. I think they ought to teach her how to give a blow job.' "

Suders said she was horrified. As a deputy sheriff, she said she had watched dozens of children testify about being sexually abused by male relatives.

"I've seen the pain in their eyes and there's a state trooper laughing about abuse of children," she said, tears flowing down her face. "You have all these children being abused and no one's helping them, and he's condoning it."

Prendergast, in his deposition and in an interview, denied that Easton had made the oral-sex comment to him. Under oath at his deposition, Easton denied it, too. In an interview, he declined to comment further about what he might have said to Suders or in her presence.

"I think when you're in a position of authority you can become a target for different people for different reasons, and you're better off just not commenting on it," Easton said.

State Police Commissioner Mill-

er referred to Easton during Miller's promotion ceremony earlier this year. He said Easton and another trooper, both of whom mentored him in the early 1980s, "epitomize what the state police is all about."

Easton said Miller is his "close friend." He said the two men had not spoken about Suders' allegations, but believes Miller knows about the lawsuit.

"I would suspect everybody is aware of it," said Easton, 53, who retired from the state police 3½ years ago and is now a deputy warden at the Bedford County jail in Bedford, Pa.

Miller declined to comment because of Suders' lawsuit, said a state police spokeswoman.

Prendergast had a different effect on Suders than did Baker and Easton, she said. He terrified her.

"He loved to tell everyone about the time a defendant described him as a Nazi stormtrooper in court because of the way he broke into her apartment. He was proud of that," she said.

The tall, thin supervisor would sit in a chair and stare at her for an entire shift, she said. Prendergast had a "reputation for beating up on people," she said in her deposition.

Prendergast said that he had

been called a stormtrooper before but that he did not recall ever laughing about that at the station. "There's been different times when we've been called stormtroopers, Gestapo, jackbooted thugs," he said. "There's a number of names a lot of troopers, not just myself, have been called when we've been out on incidents."

He denied he had a reputation for beating up people and said he did not know why Suders had said she was terrified of him. "I tried to treat her in a fair and equitable manner," he said. "I wasn't trying to intimidate her or terrorize her. I don't feel that I did."

Prendergast is now assigned to the Hollidaysburg barracks in Blair County.

Suders said her bosses' harassment escalated as the months went on.

"I kept thinking somebody was going to help me, but it just kept getting worse," she said. "I kept thinking, 'These are the Pennsylvania State Police. They don't do this. They're going to stop.' "

Accusations, resignation

Suders said she began seeking help in early April. She consulted two retired state troopers she knew, who told her to keep a writ-

ten record of what she was experiencing.

She took their advice, and each time she witnessed her bosses saying or doing something disturbing, she wrote it in a notebook, which she kept in her purse. The purse never left her sight.

She also was in regular contact with Christine Davis, who worked for state Sen. Robert Jubilerer, one of the highest-ranking Republicans in the Senate.

"It was an impossible work environment for her," said Davis in a recent interview. "She was so upset. All I can remember saying is, 'Nancy, you need to document everything. We will look into it.' And we did."

Jubilerer called Paul Evanko, then the state police commissioner, who promised to look into the matter, Davis said.

In June, Suders went for two weeks of job training at the State Police Academy in Hershey, which she passed. There, she met Maj. Virginia Smith-Elliott, the state police's equal-opportunity officer, who taught a class on sexual harassment. Afterward, Suders said she told her she might need some help and got Smith-Elliott's phone number.

In the meantime, Suders continued to keep in touch with Davis, and contacted her union and the governor's office, she said.

Eventually, Suders said, she'd had enough. On Aug. 18, on her day off, she called Smith-Elliott. Suders told her she was being harassed and couldn't find an internal-affairs complaint form at the barracks. She said she had asked Smith-Elliott to send her a complaint form.

"She said, 'I'll see what I can do,' and then hung up," Suders said. "She never even asked for my address."

Smith-Elliott, who is also a defendant in Suders' lawsuit and who retired in March 2000, could not be reached for comment. However, in her deposition, she said: "I may very well and probably did tell her about filling out the form. But I don't believe that I refused to help either in discussing what the complaint should be, the allegations or giving assistance in filling out the form or telling her where to get the form."

In her deposition, Suders said she also had told Smith-Elliott, "I was scared my bosses would retaliate against me for calling her . . . I said, 'I'm afraid they're going to set me up with drugs or something.' I said, 'I don't know

See **SUDERS** Page 21

what they're going to do to me.'"
 After the call, Suders typed an unsigned, undated resignation letter, and put it in her purse in case there was retaliation and she felt she had to quit. "I knew I'd have to seek employment elsewhere," she said. "I wanted to be professional and submit a letter of resignation instead of just walking out the door."

Two days later she reported to work for her 3-to-11 p.m. shift. All four corporals assigned to the barracks, including Baker and Prendergast, were there, she said.

"That should have told me something because they never all work at the same time," she said.

About 7 p.m., she took a break to use the bathroom. Afterward, she noticed blue specks in the toilet water and blue residue on her hands. She quickly figured out it was theft-detection powder, which is invisible but turns blue when moisture hits it. Suders thinks someone at the barracks applied the powder to the toilet seat.

In his deposition, Easton denied applying the powder to the toilet seat. He said the only place he put powder was in an envelope in a dresser drawer in the women's locker room, because he suspected someone had rifled through the drawer.

When Suders tried to clean the blue residue off her hands a few minutes later, one of the corporals spotted her and accused her of stealing, which she denied, she said. He said he was going to call Easton, who was home. She tried to resign, she said, but they wouldn't let her leave. When Easton arrived, he took her into an interrogation room, read her Miranda rights and took pictures of her hands, she said.

Suders then pulled out her resignation letter, signed and dated it, handed it to Easton and left. Easton gave a similar account of that night's events in his deposition.

After she resigned, the state police never pursued the theft accusations.

Whether internal affairs ever investigated Suders' sexual-harassment complaint after she quit is unclear. Baker, Easton and Prendergast said in their depositions that they had been cleared by internal affairs.

Bailey, her attorney, said he had requested but had never received a copy of the report, however, and noted that Suders had never been interviewed by internal affairs.

"I was told there was no investi-

gation," Bailey said. "And if there was one, that's farcical. How could they possibly have cleared those guys when neither Nancy nor any of our witnesses were ever interviewed?"

The state police declined to comment.

Samuel Walker, a national expert on police corruption, said that if Suders' description of her call to Smith-Elliott is accurate, it's "more damaging evidence" that there is a systematic problem with how the state police handles such complaints.

"This is very similar to the state of race relations in the 1960s," said Walker, author of 11 books on policing. "African-Americans would come into the police station to file a complaint and they'd say, 'There's no form.' Or they'd be threatened. So it says their process is somewhere back in the 1960s."

Gov. Rendell has promised to name an outside investigator to probe how the state police handled sexual-misc conduct complaints between 1995 and 2001.

Meanwhile, Suders' case is still making its way through the courts. A federal judge in Harrisburg dismissed her suit, but the Third Circuit Court of Appeals in Philadelphia unanimously over-

turned that decision in April. The state attorney general earlier this month asked the U.S. Supreme Court to review that decision.

If the Third Circuit's decision stands, Suders' case could open the door for lawsuits from plaintiffs who claim they were forced to quit their jobs because of sexual harassment, legal experts say.

Shortly after quitting her state police job, Suders returned part time to her deputy sheriff's job in Fulton County. She went back to full time in September 1999.

Pittman, the Fulton County sheriff, said he jumped at the chance to rehire her. "She's a good deputy," he said. "She's dependable, smart and hard-working. Employees like her are hard to find."

Although it's been five years since she worked at Troop G, McConnellsbury, Suders is still haunted by what she says happened to her.

"I can go into Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, and I can see a state policeman from those states and I can feel safe," she said, her eyes filling with tears.

"But I can't come from Fulton County to Harrisburg and feel safe, because I know what they can do." ★

Like father, like son — jail time

By **JIM SMITH**
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Son of a burglar, Steve Plytas followed in his father's footsteps.

Just like dad, the son got caught and ended up in jail.

Plytas, 22, yesterday pleaded guilty in federal court in Philadelphia to involvement in almost 50 burglaries, armed robberies and related crimes.

"Plytas participated in all but three of the crimes," Assistant U.S. Attorney Amy L. Kurland and Maurleen Barden told U.S. District Judge Timothy J. Savage.

The thefts netted the gang more than \$550,000 worth of guns, cigarettes, other goods and cash, taken from victims in Philadelphia, its northern suburbs and South Jersey.

A Sunoco gas station attendant in Burlington, N.J., was shot in the leg by one of Plytas's accomplices while Plytas and another man played lookout during a botched robbery attempt.

Plytas was the lead defendant, one of 15 charged last year as part of an interstate burglary ring, and the first to cop a plea.

One co-defendant, Louis Rogers, took a death dive off a 25th-floor balcony of the Hopkinson House, off Washington Square, in Center City, last year, after setting his girlfriend's apartment on fire.

Plytas was just 19 when the crime spree began. It continued for about two years, between July 1999 and July 2001.

Others among his 13 remaining co-defendants are likely to follow his lead in negotiating a plea bargain, according to defense attorneys. Those who don't plead guilty are to be tried in October, with Plytas a key prosecution witness against them.

The prosecutors said Plytas

and his co-defendants cased places "that looked easy to burglarize," especially businesses near wooded areas, off by themselves, with no other stores close by.

The burglars, in groups of two to four, worked at night, wearing gloves, dark clothing and masks.

The "inside" men kept in contact with lookouts who used police scanners and two-way radios to warn when the cops were coming. Crowbars and axes got the burglars inside buildings.

They cut through steel safes with a gas-powered saw.

At times, they pulled guns to rob employees who were taking cash to the bank.

The gang's biggest known score was at Bob's Gun Shop, in Croydon, Bucks County. Plytas and two accomplices stole 92 firearms worth about \$50,000, the pros-

ecutor said.

Plytas's father, Christopher N. Plytas, was sentenced in 1994 to two to 10 years in prison for heading a burglary ring that operated much the same as his son's gang.

The father's gang, which also netted more than \$500,000 in loot, according to police, was called "Ninjas" because they wore black clothing at night while pulling their heists.

The father was in court yesterday to watch his son plead guilty to charges including conspiracy, interstate transportation of stolen property, theft from a firearms dealer, robbery and burglary.

"I can't blame this on the father," said the son's defense attorney, Donald Manno, who has represented the father in the past.

"The kid is trying to turn his life around and he accepted responsibility and is going to do the best he can to get this behind him . . ."

"He's not a bad kid," Manno told a reporter. ★

STREET LEVEL by JIM MacMILLAN



POLICE BOMB disposal officer leaves Wachovia Bank Building at 5th and Market streets yesterday after a bomb scare there caused the evacuation of hundreds of workers.