

RED CIRCLE HAS ARRIVED



Photo: Jimmy Olsen

In the wake of the recent Crisis, new heroes -- and new threats -- seem to be appearing across America. In this collection of recent *Planet* pieces on several of these new arrivals, we invite you to find a broader pattern at work -- the possibility that perhaps something links these seemingly disconnected events. Writer

J. Michael Straczynski is currently preparing a new series of reports on the subject, which will seek to answer the many questions our initial coverage has posed. These reports will be published under the banner of "The Red Circle." Watch for them arriving on your newsstands weekly throughout the month of August.

"Hangman" Of The Old West Haunts San Francisco?

Witnesses Claim Mythic Figure Rides Again

by Hannah Stretab



Artist Jesus Saiz's rendition of the supposed "Hangman," reprinted from "Weird Western Tales: A Children's Treasury Of Ghastly Frontier Horrors." (Ohiyesa Press, 1976)

Perhaps the story was read to you in a book of ghost stories long ago in your childhood: a masked demon that bullets could not kill, who cast an inescapable noose around the necks of the guilty. Variants of the "Hangman" story have been recorded as far back as the Civil War, but seemed to vanish as the twentieth century loomed. But more and more San Francisco residents are coming forward to claim that it's not a myth -- the Hangman is real, and he's haunting the City by the Bay.

The accounts lack consistency -- in some tellings, he is a gaunt figure on a spectral horse, and in others, he's a hulking goliath who towers over a normal man. But all share a common setting -- the scene of a crime, or the hideaway of a suspected crimi-

nal. For that reason, San Francisco police are beginning to believe they may have a new metahuman vigilante on their hands.

Others aren't so sure. "We live in troubling times, and our minds are asked to cope with terrible things on an everyday basis," said Dr. Robert Dickering, an area physician specializing in acute trauma. "It's very easy for those who've suffered a terrible shock to fall back on myths and legends as a sort of safety blanket to protect themselves from the truth of our senseless lives. Who wouldn't want to believe that justice is inescapable? But sadly, our everyday lives reveal justice to be all too fickle."

The most generally reported sighting to date occurred one month ago.

(Continued in HANGMAN, Page A9)

Urban Legend Battles Burning Man – Or Does He?

SFPD Refuses Comment On Metahuman Involvement In Arson
by Fareed Santiago

SAN FRANCISCO--Federal and local officials remain on the hunt for the anonymous figure who is responsible for yesterday's explosions at San Francisco General Hospital and reportedly operates under the name "Inferno."

An APB was released for the suspect yesterday afternoon, depicting a tall, muscular man of indeterminate race with distinctive facial hair -- and a seemingly inexplicable resistance to fire. Indeed, unconfirmed eyewitness accounts indicate that the arsonist didn't just survive being lit on fire, he was

actively conjuring it from the air around him. The available photographs match no known pyrokinetic criminals, and sources in the police department indicate that they have no leads. It is not yet known how he eluded police custody after a spectacular waterfront explosion destroyed at least one luxury yacht.

Further complicating the case are widespread claims that the suspect was seen in pitched combat with the figure locally known as "the Hangman," whose presence SFPD vigorously denies.

(Continued in ARSON, Page A5)



The last photograph taken of the suspect before our photographer's trip to the burn ward.



OP-ED: The Hero You Deserve

Why I'm The Right Man To Right Your Wrongs

by The Web, Masked Adventurer



The author's publicity photo, available for sale as a signed glossy at his website.

I know what you've been thinking all these years, because I thought it, too. All those fancy super-heroes you see flying around -- they're all too busy with their multiverses to worry about *your* problems. You, the honest American who just needs a little extra help when the river floods, or you, the small-business owner those darned mobsters won't stop harassing about "protection." I get it. I've been there. They say Superman hears everything, but he didn't hear you call for help when your puppy ran away, did he? (OK, I'll admit there's probably a couple of you out there who did get your puppy saved by Superman. Congratulations, you're a statistically insignificant sample set. Go pet your puppy.)

But I'm here, folks I'm here for you. And I'm listening. I'm not just called The Web -- I use the web to help you.

It's very simple: You visit my website. You tell me why you need my help. And if you need my help, I'm there for you. I can't solve every problem -- but I've got a few tricks up my sleeve, and I can take on more than you'd think. As I've always believed, technology will set us free -- free from the constraints that hold us back, and free from the rules that the old heroes have always used to keep us in our place.

Oh, and ladies, it never hurts to include a photo with your application. Just kidding! But seriously, keep your JPGs under 5MB, please.



After The Rollout Of "The Shield," Questions Linger

Soldier's Missions, Family Ties Both Cloudy

by Ron Troupe

WASHINGTON -- After a spectacular unveiling ceremony, and the promise of revolutionary new developments in how America arms its fighting men and women, defense commentators are beginning to ask questions about Lieutenant Joe Higgins, who will apparently operate publicly as a super-operative codenamed "The Shield." Concerns are rising that his first mission may find him deployed in Bialya, where anti-metahuman tensions remain exceptionally high after Black Adam's rampage a year ago, but where the US military reportedly cannot accept another failed provisional government.

Lt. Higgins is said to be the first soldier to volunteer to wear a profoundly experimental suit based around nanotechnology, which the government says is seeing its first trials and is not yet ready for wider deployment, for reasons of both cost and safety. Specific details were not provided, but Lt. Higgins' eligibility for the trial appears to be related to injuries suffered in the line of duty on an undisclosed mission earlier this year. Army officials have also noted that Lt. Higgins has no surviving family, but journalists for the *Planet* have yet to independently confirm the death of his father, a biotechnology researcher. *(Continued in AMERICA'S SHIELD, Page A8)*



The Shield flies his colors in his official DoD portrait.