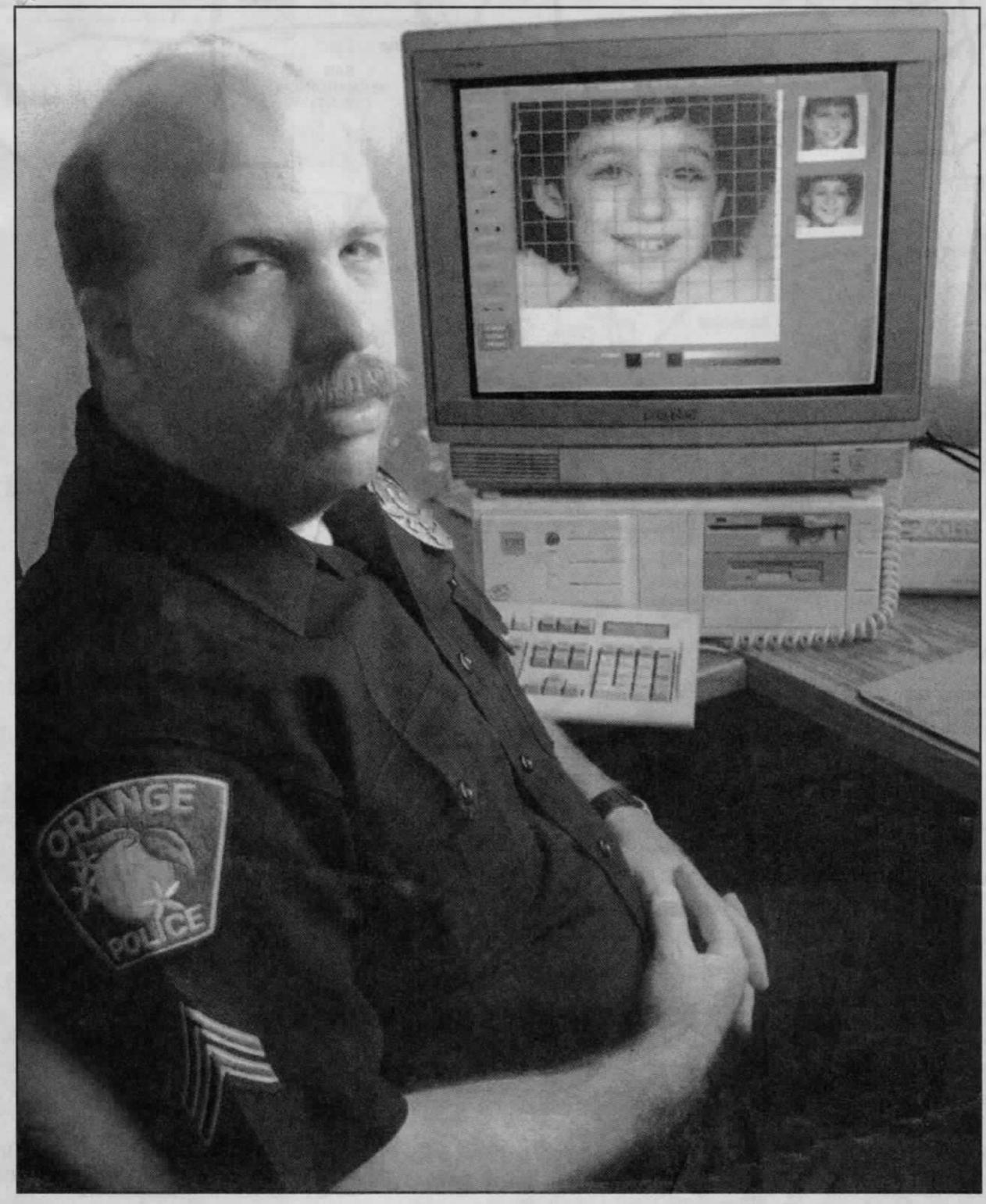


CHRISTINE COTTER / Los Angeles Times

Officer Michael Streed of the Orange Police Department elongates the face of a likeness of a missing girl.

Drawing On Technology

Computer Allows Police to Alter Fugitives' Images, 'Age' Missing Kids

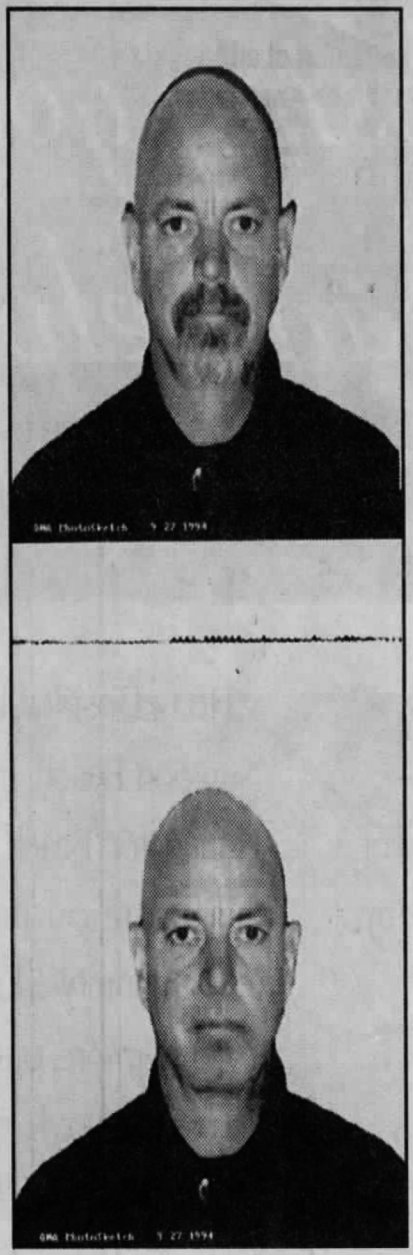
By KEN ELLINGWOOD
TIMES STAFF WRITER

ORANGE—The suspect's goateed face stared from the computer monitor, and Orange police artist Michael Streed went to work.

Streed punched up on the screen an older photograph of the man—this one showing him barefaced and chubbier—and put it next to the first. With a few clicks of his computer mouse, Streed removed the cleanshaven chin from one photo and placed it on the other. With a few more clicks, he shaved the rest of the goatee and drew in the philtrum, the indentation under the nose.

When he finished, Streed had created a genuine-looking composite image, merging features from two different periods and looks. The rendering later helped witnesses identify the man—a master of disguise who is said to gain and lose weight drastically—as the main suspect sought in the murder of a Yorba Linda supermarket manager and shooting of an Orange security guard this year.

Here is the wanted poster of the 1990s—a cutting-edge art form that most police agencies still lack the equipment and ability to produce. Using a grant from a group that searches for missing children, the Orange Police Department is the only agency in California now using a computer system that alters photographs of fugitives and "ages" children who have been missing for years.



The computer is able to take a photo of murder suspect Steven Moreland Redd, top, and show how he would look cleanshaven.

And Streed, a 36-year-old officer who draws animal cartoons in his spare time, is among a new generation of police artists whose use of computer graphics may one day render obsolete the old-fashioned composite drawing—and the skilled hands that have produced it.

"We're at the beginning stages of doing away with police artists," said Thomas F. Macris, a longtime San Jose police sketch artist who helped create one of the first computer systems for preparing composites based on hand-drawn features. It was part of the evolution that led to computerized photo enhancement used by Streed.

"If the research and development could be supported with enough money, you could have a composite program that could get rid of the police artist."

Some departments have used computers for years to create simple composites—assembling the eyes, ears, nose, hairstyle, glasses and other features from computer archives containing thousands of pictures of facial parts and accessories. These software programs allow investigators who cannot

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draw to aid a witness in re-creating the face of a suspect, a big help for agencies that can't afford a staff artist.

But Streed and a handful of police artists nationwide are beginning to employ the next level of technology, which allows police to feed photographs into the computer and then use graphics software to alter or even blend them.

One imaging program, developed by Santa Ana-based Infotec Development Inc., is finding use in searching for missing children whose past photographs can be merged with those of siblings or unrelated contemporaries to create a vision of how the child might look with the passage of time.

"If you redraw it, you might lose something from the original," Streed said. "You might not have the nose the way it looks. You might have eyes the wrong size."

In time, experts predict, computers will be used to scan police photo files for suspects who match features described by a witness. A Northern California firm called Visatex Corp. is already experimenting with a system to do that. Other expected advances will allow police to create pictures of faces with only skull fragments to go on. Such reconstructions are now done by forensic anthropologists.

"The computer has been another valuable tool in my bag of tricks," said Karen T. Taylor, a forensic artist with the Texas Department of Public Safety who trains police artists and prepares composites for television's "America's Most Wanted."

Hand-drawn composites, used routinely to hunt criminals, find missing persons and identify bodies, have been on the law enforcement scene since Scotland Yard produced a crude caricature a century ago, Taylor said.

A picture of missing Michaela Garecht at age 10 is blended with a photo of an older girl.

the computer-imaging equipment to help other agencies hunt about a dozen fugitives and missing persons, including five children. None has been found yet. Streed hopes to get more business from Orange County departments that lack the computer gear, which costs about $25,000 and was provided to Orange last year by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, based in Arlington, Va.

During a demonstration of the age-progression software, Streed calls to the screen a photo of a Hayward girl, Michaela Garecht, who was 10 when abducted by a stranger five years ago. He blends it with a photograph of an older girl with similar features but leaves the original eyes.

"You never mess with the eyes because the eyes are the big identifier," Streed says. He stretches the jawline, widens the face and adds a more up-to-date hairstyle with fuller bangs.

Then Streed places his creation next to the original photograph of Michaela for comparison. "Same girl—same eyes," he says.

Horace Heafner, a former FBI graphics chief who runs the missing-child center's computer program, said such advances have helped the group locate about 40 children in nearly four years. "We've had good results," he said. "The proof is in the pudding."

But some experts caution that technological advances alone are no substitute for skillful interviewing of witnesses and empathy—and what Macris calls "the power of intuition."

Some worry that a photographic composite might be dismissed too quickly if it is not the exact likeness people expect from pictures. Streed said the computer equipment is still most effective in the hands of artists with an eye for shadows and shapes.

"It's not like the computer has, poof, made it a touch-of-a-button thing," Taylor said. But, she added, the technology has made the work of some police artists quicker and set a new standard to keep them sharp.

"I've told classes, 'You need to be able to draw as well as that computer,' " Taylor said.