ARMING THE POLICE

An historical appraisal

The question of whether the police should be fully armed is guaranteed to produce lively debate. To fuel it, the impression is sometimes given that we are seeing a major change in policing with more and more officers being armed. In reality a study of history shows that nothing could be further from the truth. Let's look at some facts.

When the first steps were taken in 1829 toward providing the police service we know today, the new Commissioners had to overcome considerable hostility to the very idea of such an organisation. Whilst a professional police service was seen as the only alternative to the use of the army there were many who claimed that police were just the army in disguise. To emphasise the difference, the uniform adopted was designed to be as unlike any military style as possible, and no guns were to be routinely carried.

Not all the recruits joining the new service saw the benefit of this. There were several directions recorded in the early years about ensuring officers remained unarmed. For example on 8th November 1831 Richard Mayne - one of the Commissioners of the Metropolitan Police - directed that 'The Superintendents are to take particular care that the Constables do not carry Pistols about them, nor in fact Arms of any kind without the express permission of the Commissioners thereto'.

The pendulum swings

There was a major change in policy in June 1884 after the murder of two police officers by armed burglars. A survey of London officers showed that 4,430 out of 6,325 wanted to be armed and morale was so bad that the Commissioner agreed to allow night duty officers in suburban London to carry a revolver if they wished. There are some who would argue that we were closer to being a fully armed police service then than at any time in our history.

In the early 1920's, following the partition of Ireland, armed motor patrols were set up in the Capital to thwart attempts by Sinn Feiners to steal weapons from London gun dealers. Some 2,000 officers were armed for the patrols, a figure which has never been exceeded since.

The automatic right to carry a firearm was removed in July 1936. From then on a 'satisfactory reason for firearms issue' had to be given to the Station Officer, usually a sergeant. In 1983, after the shooting of a man in London after detectives mistakenly believed that he was going for a gun, the authority for issue was raised to its current level of Assistant Chief Officer of Police.

The raising of authority level, combined with the system of drawing firearms from police stations which had remained almost unchanged since the 1860s, had drawbacks. This was dramatically demonstrated on 19 August 1987 in Hungerford in the Thames Valley when Michael Ryan killed 16 people and wounded 15 more before committing suicide. The armed response took more than an hour and it was clear that the death toll could have been much higher had Ryan not killed himself.

The Metropolitan Police

The police service reviewed its response capability and came up with the Armed Response Vehicle (ARV), a permanently patrolling vehicle containing officers either carrying or with immediate access to firearms.

An armed response

Now let's get right up to date. Actual training in the use of firearms was almost non-existent until the late 1960's. One of the first full time Firearms Training Units was created in London in 1966. Its purpose was to teach officers not only how to shoot but also how to arrest armed criminals with the minimum of danger to themselves and, more importantly, to the public. Today the training also places great emphasis on the decision making process necessary before a shot is even fired.

In London there are now about 1,800 officers trained in the use of firearms. This is out of a total of 28,000 and is 3,000 less than 10 years ago. Most armed officers are involved in some kind of VIP protection or security duty and, although some officers on divisions are still trained, the immediate response to armed crime is provided by the ARVs set up in July 1991.

Last year 3,902 officers in London were assaulted. Firearms were used in 41 assaults and officers were shot at 23 times. In October last year Constable Patrick Dunne was shot and killed in Clapham answering a routine call from a member of the public to an alleged burglary. In February this year Sergeant Derek Robertson was stabbed to death, again answering a routine call to a post office. The role of the ARV crew is simply to provide immediate armed support to their unarmed colleagues and they have standing authority to carry firearms for this purpose. There can be up to 12 cars available and they must cover the entire 700 square miles that make up urban and rural London, working to a shift pattern which will give response availability 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The actual use of firearms by police is rare. In London last year shots were firedby police 3 times. In New York last year the equivalent figure was 312. So much for the commentators who persist in claiming that our streets are becoming like those in America.

An issue of morale

The arming of the police is essentially a morale issue. If officers feel that no-one else cares they demand that the means of self-protection be placed in their own hands. To retain an unarmed police service officers must have, and be seen to have, the protection they need. The compromise solution is to have a small number of armed officers in support cars with further backup immediately available, so as to provide the added reassurance to their unarmed colleagues who undertake the routine provision of the police service.

Is this enough? The real question is, do the officers who perform their duty unarmed feel that it is enough? If the answer is yes, then the day we become a fully armed police service is pushed that little bit further away.

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