

5 Tactical Options I

Police officers deployed against hostile crowds during public disorder are likely to experience emotions ranging from anxiety and fear to outright anger.

ACPO Public Order Manual

The manual sets out thirty categories of police response to unrest. They form a hierarchy of applied force designed to meet the various stages of disorder defined in its Introduction. As we have seen already, the first four categories involve the use of police officers in traditional uniforms.

From Section 5 onwards, most of the recommended options require the new look of British policing introduced in the past decade – what is officially known as ‘protective clothing’ and routinely referred to as ‘riot gear’. Sections 5 to 18 present tactics which are generally defensive in nature, designed to protect officers against attack while giving minimum cause for escalation of violence. It may, of course, be argued that the mere sight of well-defended police officers in ‘battle-dress’ is itself potentially provocative (see the remark of the Special Patrol Group officer quoted in Part 2, that people who would not normally throw anything at an unprotected officer have been known to have a go at those with riot shields). Indeed, the manual itself draws attention to the danger that ostensibly defensive or protective measures may be counterproductive if they are taken as a declaration of combat and thereby precipitate increased hostility against the police. But a clear distinction remains between manoeuvres which are intended to provide defence or protection, and those which are deliberately, in the military sense of the word, offensive. These latter options will be the subject of Part 6.

Section 5 cover the uses of *Special Patrol Groups* both alongside home beat officers in traditional uniform and in protective clothing after other officers have been withdrawn from a scene of disorder. SPG officers may be on foot or in mobile patrols in their transit vans. The significance of SPG policing has been recognized since its introduction by the Metropolitan Police in 1965, and it may well be a mark of the controversies it has raised that different forces have adopted their own names for the same type of unit. The manual lumps them all together under the heading ‘tactical group’:

Tactical group – an established group of police officers trained and equipped for specialist duties, including containment of public disorder, known variously as ‘support group’, ‘special patrol group’, ‘tactical aid group’, ‘task force’, ‘operational support unit’, ‘immediate response unit’, ‘special operations service’, etc.

In January 1987, the Metropolitan Police renamed their SPG units ‘Territorial Support Groups’.

Section 6 presents the long list of special clothing which is supplied to *Protected officers* and the balance of advantages and disadvantages set out in Part 1. Only one detail need be added here, concerning the sensitive subject of police officers’ numbers which are supposed to be displayed at all times on their shoulders:

Overalls – when overalls are worn there is a problem identifying officers, and this may be the subject of adverse comment from civil liberty groups and cause police investigating officers a good deal of work in any subsequent complaint investigation. Consideration should therefore be given to forces issuing personalized identification badges that can be readily attached to the overalls.

It would presumably aid identification if the badges could not equally readily be detached from the overalls.

Section 7 sets out various options for the diversion or control of *Public/private transport* near the area of a disturbance. It recommends the establishment of routine links between police and transport operators and the identification of diversionary routes prior to disorder. With the approval of an officer of ACPO rank, there is also the option of routing public and private transport through an area of disorder as a means of preventing assemblies.

Section 8 covers *Protected vehicles* and the procedures for taking officers into and out of a scene of unrest. It also sets out arrangements for transporting casualties and prisoners away from the area, and moving stores and equipment.

Section 9 details the basic unit of all later paramilitary operations – the *Police Support Unit*. It is remarkably similar to the riot control unit used for public order control throughout the British colonies, and to the basic unit of domestic civil defence planning. In colonial police forces, it has had a variety of names including: Riot Control Unit, Police Mobile Unit, Police Motorized Company, Police Field Force and General Service Force. But they all shared a distinctive structure, consisting of one Inspector, one NCO and eight men. Acting together as a highly trained fighting unit, they could fit into a police Land Rover.

This colonial system for transforming ordinary police officers into a paramilitary company, and the implications of its adoption in Britain, are discussed further in Part 8. When ACPO developed its own units for use in a domestic crisis, it had to ensure that they would fit into the current British command structure and means of transport. A transit van is slightly more spacious than a Land Rover, and for domestic policing an Inspector can manage more than twice as many men. The *Public Order Manual* gives its own definition: '*Police Support Unit* – a contingent of male police officers trained together for the containment of public disorder, comprising one Inspector, two Sergeants, twenty constables'. Together they fit into two transit vans.

The manual, echoing the procedures used in Hong Kong, makes possible the mobilization of every policeman in Britain into one of these units. It represents the culmination of a gradual process of mobilization which began with the appointment of the first Special Patrol Groups.

Others were included when an almost identical formation was taken as the basic unit for emergency planning of police action in the event of a nuclear war. The term 'Police Support Unit' was given to this grouping in another restricted manual, prepared in 1974, which sets out the emergency plan for police contributions to civil defence. Its title is *Police Manual of Home Defence*, and its stated purpose is to prepare police forces for nuclear war by informing them about the effects of nuclear weapons, the organisation of emergency services, the scheme of wartime regional government and the responsibilities of the police in such an emergency.

The concept of the Police Support Unit as the basis for these contingency plans is introduced as a means of providing the flexibility which will be needed 'before and after an attack'. Each PSU is to form a mobile contingency unit whose duties include the guarding of key points, reinforcement of public warnings, control of essential service routes and freezing of petrol stations. At the head of this list of police tasks is the enforcement of 'Special measures to maintain internal security, with particular reference to the detention or restriction of movement of subversive or potentially subversive people'. The mobilization of police officers into Police Support Units in a national emergency would begin, according to the *Police Manual of Home Defence*, with a message from the Home Office to Chief Constables to form PSUs in accordance with agreed plans. No specialist training was envisaged for these units in 1974, but the Home Office did suggest that 'Chief Constables will have opportunities to practise the units in peacetime when suitable policing tasks arise.'

Lord Knights recalls that ACPO seized this opportunity when preparing its own plans for control of public order in peacetime, following the confrontation at Saltley Gates. The PSU

formation was adopted for general use: 'We decided to borrow this wartime conception from civil defence and use it to organize police officers in peacetime as well'.

When ACPO prepared its own *Public Order Manual* in 1983 the process of mobilization was extended to all policemen in the country. Its tactical options for switching into Police Support Units are now taught to officers as part of basic training. On a word of command, twenty-three policemen can be taken from their normal duties and transformed into the 1:2:20 structure. If necessary, an entire police force can be mobilized into PSUs on an order from HQ. In Hong Kong, where they have been practising this transformation for several decades, the police pride themselves on being able to complete it in a matter of a few hours.

Section 10 involves officers in traditional uniform as well as those in protective clothing. It outlines five techniques of *Saturation policing*. The introductory comments stress that saturation policing requires a level of police activity 'substantially above that of intensive foot patrols' and says that the concept must be seriously considered in the immediate pre-disorder stage and in the period of de-escalation once disorder has subsided. It offers no definition of saturation policing, but does include one memorable suggestion to help visualize it: 'The phrase "army of occupation", although it has been used only in condemnation of the police, is a useful one to reflect the top end of the scale of this Tactical Option.' The objectives of saturation policing are then listed as: to deploy a large number of uniformed officers for the purpose of preventing potentially serious disorder from developing into a major problem; to discourage local bands of unruly persons from associating together in large groups which cause concern to law-abiding citizens; to allow a quick response to incidents; to allow early detection of trouble; to improve communication between police and the public and thereby increase the flow of intelligence regarding possible disorder. It depends on 'a background of unarguable numerical and physical supremacy'. The five techniques cover:

- ★ reinforcement of beats by traditional or heavy foot patrols, initially wearing conventional uniforms;
- ★ reinforcement by mobile patrols in protected personnel carriers;
- ★ maintenance of patrols with reserves;
- ★ sectorization of the area in the post-riot period;
- ★ deployment of special teams to stop and search suspect vehicles and persons in an effort to detect weapons and obtain intelligence.

The advantages are set out, including: potential for defusing a serious situation, provision of a pool of officers available for action, no requirement for special equipment, and increased police confidence and morale from knowing that adequate resources are in the area. Then, with equal frankness, come the disadvantages, including:

- ★ removes resources from unaffected areas thereby increasing the possibility of crime being committed there;
- ★ officers drafted in may be insensitive to the needs of the area and unaware of local conditions;
- ★ individual officers, detached from their normal duties, may not have worked as a unit on previous occasions with consequent reduction in effective communications;
- ★ may be regarded as 'provocative' in some quarters and serve to heighten tension within the community;
- ★ sometimes places police officers in an exposed position physically;
- ★ occasionally places individual police officers in an invidious position legally, particularly when provoked by radical or hostile element.

It is recommended that the minimum ratio of supervisory officers to constable is as laid down for Police Support Units, that is one Inspector: two Sergeants: twenty constables.

Section 11 presents three manoeuvres for *Standoff/regroup*, which are intended to strengthen police lines when they are overwhelmed or unprotected, and even when under fire from lethal weapons. In this extreme case, unarmed officers may be removed from the line of fire 'until after tactical firearms units, deployed independently from the public disorder operation, have

located and eliminated sniper fire'. There is also an outline procedure for reducing police strength in structured stages once the worst violence is over.

Section 12 covers *Artificial lighting*, with seventeen options for different types of lights – floodlights, spotlights, overhead lights, vehicle-mounted lights, helicopters with lights – and the tactical uses of created pools of darkness to conceal police operations.

Section 13 sets out the traditional techniques of crowd control using officers with linked arms to form *cordons*. Often known as 'trudging and wedging', these tactics once characterized the police response to large-scale outbreaks of unrest. They provided the unarmed thick blue line which was familiar to CND demonstrators in the fifties and student protesters in the sixties. They are as remote from the policing style which has dominated the eighties as Aldermaston is from Stonehenge, and Grosvenor Square is from Wapping.

They involve large numbers of police officers shoving themselves right up to a crowd in order to contain or move it, or forming running human wedges to break it up. The potential of these tactics for causing injuries on both sides of the line should not be underestimated. Those inclined to romanticize past confrontations as if they were no more than boisterous and gentlemanly line-outs, should remind themselves of the numbers of policemen who were taken to hospital afterwards, and the catalogue of allegations that protesters in the front of the

Section 14 is about *Checkpoints/interceptor tactics and motorway disruption*. It shows how to establish a checkpoint for vehicles and/or pedestrians, as happened most controversially during the coal dispute in 1984-5. Indeed, the manual indicates the resistance this option may meet: 'Police check/Interceptor points can be detrimental to community relations in sensitive areas. It can also generate antipathy towards police, being viewed as a gross infringement to civil liberties.' With this in mind, the manual warns that friction must be minimized by using only experienced, tactful and well-briefed officers for this purpose. The duration of any particular checkpoint must also be carefully judged: 'Check/Interceptor points retained for protracted periods have a very detrimental effect on police and public relations and will inevitably be viewed as a rather draconian and politically sensitive measure.'

Section 15 gives seven manoeuvres for containment of crowds using *Barriers*. Most of them involve the use of tape to define a psychological limit, or tubular hurdles to lend it some physical substance. Two are more drastic, and can only be used on the order of an officer of ACPO rank: one option explains the use of police vehicles to form a barrier and says that, in the absence of police vehicles, 'private vehicles may be commandeered for barrier purposes'; the other suggests using 'unorthodox vehicles/material to form barriers to protect police lines'.

Section 16 goes into the technique of *Barricade Removal*, some of which is recommended only if authorized by an ACPO rank officer.

Section 17 is mysteriously entitled *Controlled sound levels*, and recommends one of the most controversial techniques of recent policing – the use of battle cries and rhythmic drumming. It was the controversy surrounding these tactics which first brought to light the existence of the manual, when the Orgreave trials heard the Assistant Chief Constable of South Yorkshire refer to this section of the tactical options as justification for his men's behaviour (see part 3). The practice is explained under the heading of *Unifying sound*:

Use of a battle cry or other sound to unify police personnel deployed at scene of disorder – despite training, confidence and levels of suitable equipment, police officers deployed against hostile crowds during public disorder are likely to experience emotions ranging from anxiety and fear to outright anger. The use of chanting, shouting or the rhythmic beating on protective shields can act as a morale booster prior to deployment and also serves to release stress in police officers.

Advantages

- (i) the training requirement is minimal

- (ii) police morale may be increased
- (iii) a sense of unity will be instilled into police officers
- (iv) police officers' anxieties about impending deployment will be lost in the sense of group confidence engendered
- (v) noise levels draw attention to a police show of strength
- (vi) tension in police officers may be released by chanting and beating on shields.

Disadvantages

- (i) such action may be interpreted as a lack of police discipline with resultant complaints or critical comment.

Special considerations

Officers embarking on an active manoeuvre spontaneously produce a cry. Even in defensive positions they may resort to shield tapping or chanting which is very difficult to stop.

Recommendation

Option recommended for use only when necessary to lift morale of a beleaguered police unit to enable it to break through to safety.

Lord Scarman's report on the Brixton disorders of 1981 records that this tactic was used by police at the time. He compares their shouting to that of ancient warriors going into battle and says it was unfortunate and unworthy of a disciplined force. In spite of the need to keep morale high while under ferocious attack, the report finds that the behaviour of the police was calculated to arouse fear and apprehension in those citizens who heard it, some of whom were no doubt perfectly peaceful. Lord Scarman's conclusion is terse: 'Such behaviour, despite extenuating circumstances, must be stopped.' The authors of the manual, and those who approved its contents, clearly thought otherwise.

There is also a description of two options which involve police using no sound at all – silently approaching a scene on foot or in vehicles.

One other tactic in this section involves the use of sound to soothe a crowd. It is as close as the manual's authors come to surreal, if unintended, humour. They begin with the observation that practical use is already made of the well-recognized effect of music on human and animal behaviour. The tunes piped into dentists' waiting rooms are given as an example, and a suggestion of similar tactics is made for the police: 'Recorded sound or music, preferably of a soothing nature or consisting of popular songs to induce members of a crowd to begin singing, can be delivered using conventional loudspeaker systems, either handheld or vehicle.' Among the advantages listed is that police officers present will also experience the calming effect, though the manual does not specify whether they too should begin singing.

But there are, of course, disadvantages as well. These include a warning that the sound levels produced may offend local authority noise officers under the provisions of the Control of Pollution Act 1974. There is also the risk that singing could impair police communications. Finally, timing is said to be important, and ACPO does stress that this tactic is 'of little value once actual fighting, arson and looting has begun'. In all it might be simpler to take the advice of one user of the manual, who suggests that this tactic should be turned into a threat: 'Why don't we just hold up a large banner saying – DISPERSE OR WE PLAY BARRY MANILOW?'

Section 18 concludes the catalogue of defensive options with eighteen manoeuvres for officers equipped with *Long shields*. Parts of this section were placed in the House of Commons library after appearing as evidence during the Orgreave 'riot' trials, but some key elements were omitted from the version read out in court. The full text of the House of Commons document is reproduced in Appendix C; in addition to long shields, it also covers some manoeuvres involving short shields and mounted police which are discussed in Part 6.

The long shield manoeuvres can be used either as a display of strength, or for 'general crowd confrontation', or approaching and entering buildings, or recovering police trapped on

the wrong side of the front line. There are also instructions on the use of portable fire extinguishers, designed to prevent any repetition of the scenes in Brixton in 1981 when some officers were appalled to find that petrol bombs could send flames round or underneath their shields. Some even found that the foam padding on their 'protective' shields caught fire itself.

Only the first seven manoeuvres in this section have been made public. Manoeuvres 8 to 18, though little different in principle, were not introduced as evidence during the Orgreave trials and have not made their way to the House of Commons library. A sample of 'brief descriptions' will indicate their nature: wheeling at junction, starburst, three man overhead, recovering injured officer – the pick-up, rescue/ambulance teams. More significantly, the court heard nothing of the lists of advantages and disadvantages which follow each manoeuvre. For example, the 'show of force' described in manoeuvre one is qualified by the following observations:

Advantages

- (i) may intimidate some elements of the crowd and discourage riotous behaviour
- (ii) may bolster the morale of foot officers in close contact with the crowd
- (iii) easily executed and withdrawn as situation changes

Disadvantages

- (i) may trigger a worsening in behaviour of the crowd
- (ii) may be seen by some elements of the crowd as an invitation to discharge missiles towards police lines.

The disadvantages of manoeuvre two, the unit shield cordon, include one which is a common complaint among front-line officers: 'May be regarded by the officers as an "Aunt Sally" position without seeing the reason for it.'

Other listed advantages and disadvantages of manoeuvres in this section are mainly practical considerations concerning speed of movement, the dangers of opening gaps in the police line, and particular points of vulnerability to attack.

One final remark about defensive shields may be relevant, before moving on to the short shields police use when they go on the attack. Lord Knights, formerly Chief Constable of the West Midlands, recalls the fear his officers felt when they came under attack in the mid-seventies and had nothing but milk crates and dustbin lids for protection. The police began looking for better defences. 'We had seen shields in use in Northern Ireland both by the military and by the RUC, and it was that image we cottoned on to', he told *Brass Tacks* in 1985. He remembered that similar shields had been ordered up for police use, the appropriate supplies coming 'from military sources', because nobody else was making them at the time.