5 Police Commander –
The Notting Hill Riot

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Introduction

Thrown with great force, the two lumps of tarmac came hurtling through the front windscreen of the unmarked police car. Oh dear! What had I got myself into? Why hadn’t I gone straight home from the Metropolitan Police Training School at the end of the normal working day, instead of returning to Notting Hill Police Station?

It was Tuesday, 20 April 1982. I had just attended the second day of a course set up following a recommendation in the report by Lord Scarman (1981) that:

the analysis of the disorder in Brixton ... and the experience in the handling of disorder elsewhere, underline in particular the need for increased training of officers, both at junior and command levels, in the handling of disorder. (p. 97, para 3.72)

For the first two days we had been at the Metropolitan Police Training School, listening to lectures and taking part in tabletop exercises. One of the scenarios had been based on Notting Hill but, as the Divisional Commander, I had not been allowed to take part. Instead, I had taken part in one based in Dalston, a small area of Northeast London. The following day, Wednesday, we were due to attend the Metropolitan Police Public Order Training Centre at Hounslow.

Notting Hill

Notting Hill was part of ‘B’ District of the Metropolitan Police at that time. A small area of West London sometimes referred to as North Kensington; it had been synonymous with racial conflict and disorder, to a greater or lesser extent, ever since four days of rioting in 1958. Dubbed a ‘race riot’, the disorder on that occasion was predominantly between black and white youths, with the police in the middle trying to keep the peace. In 1976 there had been serious disorder on the second day of the annual Notting Hill Carnival, when a section of the crowd threw bricks, bottles and other missiles at police officers, whose only defence to this violent attack was dustbin lids, empty milk crates and plastic ‘no parking’ cones. Over 400 police officers were injured. Following this, plastic protective shields were introduced. In 1980, serious rioting had broken out in Bristol following a raid by the police on the Black and White Cafe in the St Paul’s district, an area not dissimilar to the All Saints Road area of Notting Hill. In 1981, in April, there were three days of rioting in Brixton in south London. Immediately following the riots, Lord Scarman was appointed to investigate the causes, but, before he could complete his report, there was more rioting in July, in a number of towns and cities throughout England, most notably in Birmingham, Liverpool – where CS gas was used for the first and, to-date, only time against a crowd on the British mainland, and one person was killed when he was run over by a police vehicle – and Manchester. There was minor disorder in Notting Hill on this occasion but it was nothing like on the scale that occurred in other areas.

The problem area in Notting Hill in 1982, as it had been for a number of years, was centred on All Saints Road. It was, and indeed still is, a fairly narrow street running from Tavistock Road in the north to Westbourne Park Road in the south. Crossing it were two highways, St Luke’s Mews and Lancaster Road, both of which run from east to west. Also running from east to west from the east-side of All Saints Road is McGregor Road (see figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1 Notting Hill
With the exception of the Apollo Public House on the corner of All Saints Road and Lancaster Road, that part of All Saints Road which runs between Lancaster Road and Westbourne Park Road consisted of terraced three-storey buildings, all abutting onto the pavement. The buildings were, in the main, used as small shops, cafes, etc., at ground floor and basement level with the upper two floors being used for residential purposes.

Whilst the majority of the population went about their lawful businesses, a minority, not all of them resident in the Notting Hill area, were engaged in the buying and selling of cannabis and other drugs, running illegal drinking dens, known as shebeens, and some were involved in street robberies and burglaries.

First Incident – a Bottle is Thrown

At about 7 p.m. on 20 April 1982, a bottle was thrown at two young police officers as they patrolled All Saints Road on foot. The bottle, which was thrown from behind the officers, just missed one of them before smashing into the wall. Unable to identify the thrower, or, indeed, the direction from which it had come, the officers continued their patrol as if nothing had happened.

Second Incident – a Prisoner is Lost

At about 9 p.m., three police officers, two male and one female, on a routine patrol stopped a man and a woman in Portobello Road, about ten yards north of the junction with Westbourne Park Road, after they had received information from another police officer that one or both of them had just purchased drugs in All Saints Road. They questioned the two people and found a piece of resinous substance in the woman’s pocket. This was later analysed and found to be 27.5 grams of cannabis resin, which, at that time, would have fetched about £70 on the street market. The woman was arrested and one of the officers radioed for a police van to convey them to the police station. Nothing having been found in the man’s possession he was told he could go. At that point, a number of people, both male and female, converged on the officers from a local fast food take-away in Portobello Road and released the woman from custody. All the people, including the woman, ran to All Saints Road. Two of the three police officers were injured in this confrontation.

A number of police area cars responded to the radio message from one of the three officers requesting urgent assistance. By now there was a large, hostile crowd in All Saints Road and two of the responding police cars were damaged by missiles thrown at the vehicles as they were driven westwards along Westbourne Park Road. As a result, one of the cars sent the following message to the Metropolitan Police Control Room at New Scotland Yard:

Information for all units. If you go past this road they’re going to stone us. Suggest that the only way to deal with this problem is for shields. Do we have a Senior Officer to authorise it?

The Riot

I was conscious of the fact that, in his report published in November 1981, Scarman had said that ‘the disorders [in Brixton in April 1981] revealed weaknesses in the capacity of the police to respond sufficiently firmly to violence in the streets’ and, that ‘officers untrained in the command of men carrying [shields] found themselves thrust into the front line.’ (p. 71, paragraph 4.90). Various experiences gained as I came up through the ranks convinced me that it was essential for police commanders to be both familiar and comfortable with the tactics being taught to the officers they were likely to command in riot situations. This, together with the fact that I was aware of the history of disorder and racial conflict in Notting Hill, led me to ensure that I was on the first of the three-day courses for officers of my rank being run at the Metropolitan Police Training School.

I had returned to Notting Hill Police Station that evening because I knew that six members of the Joint Services Staff Course, a prestigious course attended by senior military officers from all over the world, were visiting B District that night and two of them would spend time on Notting Hill Division. It was my intention to be present to brief and debrief them. In the intervening period they would spend some time talking to police officers in the various departments at the station and patrolling the division in a police car.

I was sitting in my office at Notting Hill Police Station waiting for the two military personnel to return to the station following a period in a patrol car, when the above message came through at about 9.20 p.m. I was dressed in civilian clothes.

I did not want police units to respond to this incident in a haphazard fashion as had so often been the case in the past in London and elsewhere. An operational plan existed for responding to serious incidents in All Saints Road and I immediately gave instructions for a message to be sent over the radio directing units to stand-by in positions in accordance with the plan. The standby positions were deliberately located sufficiently far away from any likely flash point as not to make the crowd aware of their deployment. The fact that, on
this occasion, units were deployed to their standby positions, without further prompting, by a constable who was driving one of the patrol cars at the time, showed the value of such plans being widely known and regularly discussed. As a result, police units were deployed to locations as follows:

- Lancaster Road junction with Ladbroke Grove B30, E30 and F30.
- Westbourne Park Road junction with Ladbroke Grove H30.
- Ledbury Road junction with Westbourne Park Road F Zero and 2 R/T Cars.
- Tavistock Road junction with St Luke's Road D30 and DR22.

I also gave an instruction that all police units converging on the area were to do so silently. On a number of previous occasions in both Notting Hill and elsewhere I had experienced situations in which large numbers of people had been drawn to locations by the sight of police vehicles, using blue flashing lights and sounding their audible warning instruments, going to a particular area or location and I did not want this to happen on this occasion.

By now I had changed into uniform and, at about 9.25 p.m., I was driven from the Police Station by Sergeant Hole. I was sitting in the front passenger seat. Behind me, in a rear seat, sat Inspector Graham Sharpe, the duty inspector. My intention on leaving the station was twofold:

- to visit the scene to assess the situation, and
- to search out one of the local 'street leaders' to discuss with him how we could, together, defuse the situation.

We approached All Saints Road by driving in an easterly direction along Westbourne Park Road. This was a mistake because when we reached a point approximately 30 yards west of All Saints Road we were suddenly confronted by a crowd of about 50 people who immediately started attacking the car with missiles. had been too pre-occupied thinking about how I was going to deal with the situation and what I was going to say to any of the 'street leaders' to notice the route Sergeant Hole was taking. Because the events of that evening were totally unexpected, my normal driver was not available. I had visited All Saints Road on a number of previous occasions when tension was high. From experience, I knew that when trouble did erupt, it did so in the southern half of All Saints Road, between Lancaster Road and Westbourne Park Road. On these occasions, my regular driver would invariably skirt the area and come in from the northern end of All Saints Road, i.e. from Tavistock Road.

Two fairly large pieces of tarmac crashed through the front windscreens of the car. One hit Sergeant Hole on the shoulder; the other flew between us and landed on the back seat next to Inspector Sharpe. Despite being slightly injured, Sergeant Hole immediately threw the car into reverse and we speedily backed down as far as Portobello Road. At the same time I ordered all the Immediate Response Units from their stand-by positions into All Saints Road, with instructions to disperse the crowd. B30, E30, F30, D30 and DR22 entered All Saints Road from the Lancaster Road end. Some missiles were thrown and DR22 suffered a broken windscreen but the crowd rapidly melted away on the arrival of the police vehicles. Many of them ran into the terraced houses on either side of the street. One person was arrested.

The Second Withdrawal

I was mindful of the sensitivity of any police operation in a mainly ethnic area at that time. The Searman report (1981, p. 64), had criticised the police for 'errors of judgement' and 'a lack of imagination and flexibility' when policing such areas and I was anxious not to draw unnecessary criticism on the Metropolitan Police Force. Hearing that the crowd had been dispersed, at 9.32 p.m. I ordered all the police units to leave All Saints Road and return to Notting Hill Police Station. My purpose in doing this was two-fold:

- to, hopefully, allow the situation to cool down.
- at the same time, I wanted to re-group my resources and be in a position to redeploy in a more orderly fashion than had been the case previously.

However, I was conscious of the judge's comments about the police withdrawal from St Paul's, a mainly ethnic area of Bristol, in 1980. On this occasion, the police had been overwhelmed following a raid on the Black and White Cafe and the local Chief Constable took the decision 'to withdraw to regroup, to gather strength and to obtain sufficient reinforcements to ensure a speedy return to law and order with a minimum of bloodshed.' In his report to the Home Secretary, the Chief Constable said, 'it was hoped that the removal of police - the object of the violence - would quieten the crowd and itself help the return to order'. However, in the subsequent trial of some of the rioters, the judge called it 'a period of re-arming, not a prelude to normality.' (see Harris, Wallace & Booth, 1983).
fury of the crowd was directed at the police, that fury would cease if its object was removed.' Scarman (1981, p. 70) rejected this criticism on the grounds that 'arson and looting in Railton Road were already under-way by the time of the attempted mediation' and there is little doubt that Commander Fairbairn would have been heavily criticised had he done so. However, the situation on this occasion was slightly different. There were no mediators immediately to hand and, at the time of the withdrawal I was unaware of any arson or looting.

At the police station I realised that time was short if I had to gain the initiative as quickly as possible before any serious damage was done. I had a clear idea of what I wanted to do if it became necessary; consequently I gave the officers-in-charge of all the units – some were inspectors and some were sergeants – a brief outline of what had occurred and said that I hoped the situation would defuse itself after the dispersal of the youths. However, in case it did not, they were to prepare themselves for a more precise operational deployment, which meant getting dressed in flame-retardant overalls and wearing protective helmets. They were also to be ready to equip themselves with the new, small, round protective shields introduced into the Metropolitan Police following the serious shortcomings in both equipment and tactics at Brixton the previous April. Scarman (1981 p. 97) had suggested that the use of the long shields at Brixton had encouraged 'officers to adopt a largely defensive posture' which served 'to attract missiles from a crowd' with the result 'that lines of police officers behind the shields effectively become 'Aunt Sallies' for the crowd to aim at.' I was determined that this would not be the case. There was no discussion, merely an opportunity at the end to ask questions to clarify the directions I had given.

Re-deployment

Between 9.45 p.m. and 10.10 p.m., fourteen telephone calls were received in the Metropolitan Police Control Room at New Scotland Yard from members of the public which suggested that, in the vicinity of All Saints Road:

- youths were arming themselves with bricks;
- barricades were being erected;
- petrol bombs were being manufactured, using bottles, cloth wicks and petrol.

One caller estimated the number of people in the street to be about 500; others estimated it at slightly less. Whilst I had no confirmation from police sources that the information I was receiving was correct, and whilst there have been occasions when misleading information has deliberately been fed into the police by individuals and groups for personal motives, I had no reason to doubt the general accuracy of the information on this occasion because I was aware that some of the calls came from residents who overlooked the area but were not part of the group that normally frequented All Saints Road. In fact, the information turned out to be remarkably accurate.

As these telephone calls were being received and passed to me over the radio, I deployed units again to stand-by positions as follows:

- Lancaster Road, 50 yards west of Ladbroke Grove. B30, F30.
- Westbourne Park Road, 50 yards west of Ladbroke Grove C30, G30, G31.
- Great Western Road junction with Tavistock Road D30, H30.
- Ledbury Road about 50 yards south of Westbourne Park Road E30, BH2, N30.
- Powis Square (south side) No 6 Unit, Special Patrol Group. 10

By 10 p.m., I had taken up a position in a police car at the northern-most end of All Saints Road – just to the north of the junction with Tavistock Road. I had a map of the area on my lap; a police constable was acting as my driver and another constable as my radio operator.

As more information came to me from telephone calls from members of the public via the Central Control Room at New Scotland Yard, at 10.05 p.m., I moved some of the units closer to the scene. B30 and F30 were instructed to move forward in Lancaster Road to a position approximately 50 yards west of Portobello Road. The standby position at their original location was filled by No. 8 Unit of the Special Patrol Group. C30, G30 and G31 were instructed to move forward along Westbourne Park Road to a position approximately 50 yards west of Portobello Road. Their original standby location was filled by No. 5 Unit of the Special Patrol Group.

At 10.05 p.m., I gave instructions that, on my word of command, units were to move from their standby positions to the following locations:

- All Saints Road junction with Lancaster Road H30, D30, B30, F30.
- All Saints Road junction with Westbourne Park Road No 6 Unit Special Patrol Group, E30, G30, G31.
At about 10.10 p.m., as a result of the information contained in the telephone calls being received from members of the public by the Central Control Room at New Scotland Yard, I was able to tell units that there appeared to be barricades across:

- All Saints Road at its junction with Westbourne Park Road.
- St Luke’s Mews (both sides) at the junction with All Saints Road.
- Lancaster Road (west side) at its junction with All Saints Road.

At 10.12 p.m., I gave my final instructions over the radio:

For the information of all units on this operation – when I give the word to move in, I want you to move in and I want as many arrests as possible.

The message was repeated by the controller at Force headquarters.

At 10.14 p.m., I gave my order:

I want all units, all units to move in now – all units to move in now, demolish the barricades, as many arrests as possible.

With that, all the units moved in quickly and silently, taking the crowd in All Saints Road completely by surprise. At All Saints Road junction with Westbourne Park Road, a British Leyland 1100 had been placed at right angles across the street and doused in petrol. In St Luke’s Mews (west) a van had been turned on its side; various obstacles such as old doors and other pieces of wood and galvanised steel had been placed around it to make a barricade. In St Luke’s Mews (east) a Rover motor car had been parked at right angles across the mews. In Lancaster Road, about 20 yards west of All Saints Road, a builders skip and a British Leyland 1100 car had been placed at right angles across the road.

Twenty-five petrol bombs, primed and ready to light, were seized by the police, together with cans and plastic containers containing further supplies of petrol, at two different locations. One cache of petrol bombs was found at the junction in All Saints Road at the junction with Lancaster Road; a second cache was found in All Saints Road at the junction of St Luke’s Mews. The bottles of a third cache, which was in All Saints Road at the junction with Westbourne Park Road, were quickly broken as the police arrived.

Twenty-six arrests were made at the time, which together with the person arrested at about 9.30 p.m., made 27 in total. They were charged with a variety of offences including the possession of offensive weapons (petrol bombs and bricks), threatening behaviour, assault on police and using insulting or threatening words. It was relevant to note that only 3 of those arrested resided in the vicinity of All Saints Road and only 8 on Notting Hill police division.

I remained where I was, hidden from view, until at 10.19 p.m., 5 minutes after I gave the order to move against the barricades, when one of the Immediate Response Units reported the road to be all clear. Despite my closeness to the scene, I did not want to become embroiled in any running battle that might develop. It was essential that I remained apart from what was going on as the police entered All Saints Road in case further deployments were necessary.

**Criticisms of my Actions**

Amongst the criticisms subsequently levelled at me were four, which have a particular significance. Firstly, why did I go to the scene, particularly on the second occasion? Why did I not stay at Notting Hill Police Station where maps and communications were abundant? It must be remembered that this incident occurred before what is commonly known as the Gold, Silver, Bronze concept of command (see Arbuthnot this volume) was introduced. Until just before I deployed for the second time, when a chief inspector, who had no experience of public order policing, arrived from another division, I was the only officer above the rank of inspector immediately available. Additionally, I wanted to be at the scene immediately following the deployment of the units to ensure that only such force as was necessary to disperse the crowd and restore order was used.

Secondly, following on from this, there was criticism of my instruction that I wanted as many arrests as possible. In a planned demonstration, it is possible to give detailed briefings to those who are to be deployed in the event of disorder. In this case it was not. The various units had come from all over London in response to a worsening situation and there had been insufficient time to give them a detailed briefing. By focusing the minds of the officers on arrests I hoped to reduce the possibility that the amount of force used in the dispersal of the crowd would be excessive.

In addition, as soon as I was aware that arrests had been made, I sent an instruction by radio to Notting Hill Police Station that a doctor should be summoned to examine everyone who had been arrested. Twenty-four of those arrested were subsequently seen by a doctor at the police station. A number had superficial cuts, etc., consistent with struggling whilst being
arrested, and one was taken to hospital where he was detained for observation because he claimed he had been unconscious for a short while, although no apparent injuries were found. He was released from hospital the following day. Three of those arrested refused to allow the doctor to examine them other than visually. There was not a single complaint that excessive force had been used.

Thirdly, why did I box the rioters in? By having units approaching from every direction, I left the crowd with no escape route. In his report into the Red Lion Square riot of 1974,14 Lord Scarman (1975) had criticised the police for not leaving an escape route when they were deployed to disperse the crowd, saying 'it is important for the officer in charge to ensure, wherever possible, that a crowd has sufficient means of moving away before taking action to disperse or disrupt it.' (p. 40) I took the view that the circumstances in this case were different. At Red Lion Square it was a political demonstration and there can be no doubt that many peaceful protestors were caught up in the crowd that had been boxed in by the police. At Notting Hill, however, any people who were of peaceful persuasion had an opportunity to leave the area following the withdrawal of police units on the first occasion they entered All Saints Road. Anyone seeing the activity that followed, the barricades being erected and the arming of people with bricks and petrol bombs, should have been aware that the police were likely to take some positive action and therefore had an opportunity to leave the area right up to the time the police were ordered in.

Fourthly, the crowd was given no warning of the impending police action. In his report into the Red Lion Square riot, Scarman (1975) claimed that warnings should generally be given because it enables those 'without violent intent' to leave and those who remain cannot claim 'that police action came as a total surprise.' (p. 40) Advice given to police commanders today suggests that before taking any overt action, such as a baton charge, a warning should be given to the crowd, but, in his report into Red Lion Square, Scarman indicated that 'there will be some occasions where the police need to keep the element of surprise in order to secure the success of their operation.' (p. 40) I was concerned to ensure that there would be the minimum number of injuries both to my own officers as well as the public. I am convinced that, had such a warning been given to the crowd, the barriers erected across the street would have been set alight and the advancing officers would have been in considerable danger from the petrol bombs that would almost certainly have been thrown at them.

Conclusions

Attempts to defuse the situation by twice withdrawing having failed, I believe I was left with no alternative other than to bring the matter to a swift conclusion at about 10.15 p.m. To have delayed the efforts to restore order, even for five minutes, would have enabled the crowd to have set light to at least one of the barricades and there is little doubt they would have been ready to throw the lighted petrol bombs at the advancing police officers, thus escalating the situation considerably.

It is generally recognised that stress is a natural reaction to unnatural or unusual events. I was not conscious of suffering from an increased adrenaline flow as the events unfolded but, rightly or wrongly, there was a sense of euphoria later that evening and on the days following the 20 April. After all the criticisms of the police response to the disorders of 1981 in various parts of the country, the units that responded to the disorder in Notting Hill had done so extremely effectively showing the benefits of the training they had undergone in the previous nine months. This was generally reflected in the media and in parliament.

The following day, the events shared the front page of the Sun newspaper with a report that the British Task Force had retaken South Georgia from the Argentines; the Daily Express described it as a 'battle'. The Standard reported, in huge headlines across its front page, 'Notting Hill Riot — 24 held'; and the Kensington News and Post headlined its front page with 'All Saints riot flares.' The following weekend, The Sunday Times analysed the incident in a fairly lengthy article.15

Six days later, on 26 April, in a statement to the House of Commons, the Home Secretary, William Whitelaw, described it as 'an example of the sort of action which has to be taken quickly and decisively'.16

Reflections

Not surprisingly I had never heard of Gary Klein or of Naturalistic Decision-Making in 1982. As a police officer I had attended courses in what was originally called man-management and which subsequently became known as management training as I rose through the ranks but, with the exception of the three-day course I was attending at the time of this incident, none of it related to decision-making when faced with a rapid onset chain of events. Since then, however, Gary Klein (1998) and others have emphasised the importance of experience when making decisions in rapidly developing, unstructured situations. Shortly after this riot, I was posted to the staff at the Police Staff-
College Bramshill where I became familiar with a book by an eminent military historian, Liddell Hart (1967) called *Strategy: The Indirect Approach*. In it, Liddell Hart argues that there are two kinds of experience, direct and indirect.

Direct experience is self-explanatory. In the context of this chapter, it is actually responding to a riot. My direct experience had involved the policing of a number of disorderly situations. These included the St Pancras Rent riots in 1960 as a constable, the anti-American demonstrations over Vietnam in and around Grosvenor Square in 1968 as an inspector, and at least three incidents in East London, between 1972 and 1976, as a chief inspector. Additionally during this latter period I had spent four years policing Arsenal football ground on a regular basis, at a time when so-called football hooligans regularly went on the rampage. Between 1979 and 1982 I had policed a number of demonstrations in Central London, some of which involved clashes between right and left wing movements, e.g. the National Front and British Movement in conflict with the Anti-Nazi League, and the annual Notting Hill Carnival. Despite this, the number of occasions on which individual police commanders are faced with a spontaneous outbreak of disorder in contrast to disorder which occurs at a pre-planned event, e.g. the Poll Tax riot in Trafalgar Square in 1990 and the City of London riot in 1999, is rare.

Indirect experience, on the other hand, is achieved by training and studying history amongst other things. I had attended the Metropolitan Police Public Order Training Centre at Hounslow on a regular basis and had studied past incidents of disorder, learning lessons from both positive and negative actions. Unlike military commanders who seem to put pen to paper as soon as a battle is over, police commanders have generally appeared extremely reluctant to do so. Consequently, there are very few personal accounts of the response to disorder. However, following the inner-city riots of 1980, 1981 and 1985 and the industrial disorders associated with the miners’ strike in 1984/1985 and the printers’ strike in 1986/1987, a number of books on such events were written by, in the main, academics. This trend continued into the 1990s. But, prior to the events in Notting Hill in 1982, there were only a few accounts available. In addition to those mentioned earlier, the following are worthy of note: (Constable, 1970; Critchley, 1970; Dumnett, 1980; Kernan, 1968; Mather, 1959; McConch, 1965; Thurston, 1967; Williams, 1967).

As I saw the inadequacies of the police in 1980 and 1981 in responding to serious disorder, and, in particular, the inability of some police commanders to comprehend what was required, I had given a great deal of thought to what I would do if and when I was faced with such problems.

A number of people have since written on this subject. For instance, writing nearly ten years after the events of the early eighties, Waddington (1991) suggested that the police continually failed,

to appreciate the nature of the task of quelling serious disorder. They, and many others, remain blinded by their traditional image of policing public order without recourse to overtly aggressive tactics. From the vantage-point of 1990, the development of police public-order tactics is confused and out of touch with reality. (p. 159)

In relation to the 1981 Brixton riots, former Home Secretary William Whitelaw (1990) subsequently wrote in his autobiography, ‘As a trained soldier, I was struck by the immobility of the police response on the Brixton streets’. He went on to suggest that the police should consider ‘outflanking movements, so much a part of military folklore’ and that the rioters should be ‘harried and kept on the move’. (p. 244) And, in an article written shortly after I had spent four years running courses in the management of public disorder at the Police Staff College (Moore, 1986, p. 89), I suggested that it was,

a fallacy to believe that every senior or middle-ranking police officer will make a good incident or ground commander. In the same way as there are those who have a talent for computer or communication systems, administration, organisational planning (as opposed to operational planning) or criminal investigation, there are those who have a similar talent for the handling of public disorder. The most capable officers in running a division on a day-to-day basis are not necessarily those who will stand up best either to a spontaneous eruption of disorder or indeed to the strain of prolonged public disorder.

It follows, therefore, that:

the selection and training of police commanders to deal with such eventualities is crucial.

When I made my first foray into All Saints Road, I was the only senior officer present at Notting Hill at the time. Nevertheless, it could be argued that I should not have placed myself in a position where I could have been seriously injured. On previous occasions, the frequenter of All Saints Road were fairly respectful of rank and I never found myself on the receiving end of the kind of abuse to which constables, sergeants and even inspectors were subjected. Added to that, my deputy, Superintendent Gwen Symonds, had only ten days previously responded to an incident in which a crowd in All Saints Road had started to erect barricades. On this occasion she had been able to contact at least one of the ‘street leaders’ and to defuse the situation. Additionally,
there had been occasions in the past when I had negotiated a peaceful solution to situations, which had the potential for serious conflict. I had, therefore, not considered the possibility of me being attacked. In other words, I had not gone sufficiently down the ‘what if?’ path.

This first foray into All Saints Road was disjointed and disorganised with no overall plan as to what to do once the units got into the street, other than disperse the crowd. Compared with that, the second foray was highly organised. As information built up that the street was not going to quieten down, and that barricades were being put in place and petrol bombs prepared, I had a brief amount of time to choose an option, given my knowledge of public order policing in general, coupled with my knowledge of the basic plan, the area and the people who frequented it.

- Mediation is always the first option. But history has shown that this often fails and it is important to be in a position to implement alternative strategies.
- Any plan to deal with disorderly crowds should be kept as simple as possible.
- If the initiative has been lost to the rioters during the early stages, it must be recovered by the police as quickly as possible.

Lessons

There are three essential elements for success in dealing with any public disorder situation:

- **Proper launching, which includes planning, the provision of equipment and the build-up of resources, particularly if the outbreak of disorder occurs suddenly.** If the deployment of police units is planned on sound strategic and tactical understandings of the principles of dealing with public disorder, the police are more likely to gain the upper hand quickly.

- **The courage, initiative and skill of police commanders once disorder has broken out.** In order to respond effectively, police commanders, in their various grades, must have a sound understanding of the techniques of staging the many and varied operations that their officers may be required to undertake in public disorder situations, whether defensive or offensive. The acquisition of such an understanding requires both, a study of history and rigorous training.

- **The professionalism, confidence and morale of the officers who go to make up the various units responding to the disorder.** Once again, rigorous training is vital if increased professionalism is to be achieved. It is essential that police commanders involve themselves in all aspects of planning and training so that the officers who subsequently respond will have confidence in their ability to restore order both effectively and efficiently.

If any of these three is missing the situation may well be lost.

Notes

1. At that time, a Divisional Commander in the Metropolitan Police held the rank of Chief Superintendent. Notting Hill Division was staffed by approximately 270 sworn officers and 50 civilians.

2. Two other divisions, Chelsea and Kensington, made up the District. The District headquarters were attached to Kensington Police Station.

3. The use of CS gas on this occasion was subsequently severely criticised in some quarters. Because the police were in danger of being overrun, the Chief Constable authorised the use of a type of CS gas which was designed to penetrate barricades when hostages were being held by criminals or terrorists. It had not been designed for use in crowd situations.

4. An area car normally had a crew of two, a driver and a radio operator.

5. Two senior police officers, one from the UK and one from overseas, also attended the course.

6. At that time, an Immediate Response Unit normally consisted of 1 sergeant and 10 constables in a protected vehicle. Two Immediate Response Units would normally be under the command of an inspector. All Immediate Response Units used the call signs 30 or 31 preceded by their District letter, and all officers had protected helmets and flame-retardant overalls. Long shields and the new small round shields were carried on each vehicle. F Zero was a dog unit containing two constables and two dogs. DR22 was an unprotected vehicle with an ad-hoc crew.

7. Whilst I was not conscious of thinking specifically about the Scarman Report during this time, in the five months between publication of the report and the date of these events, i.e. 20 April 1982, I had given a great deal of thought to what I would do if faced with serious disorder in Notting Hill. Additionally, I had discussed the subject with senior staff, i.e. the superintendent, chief inspectors and inspectors at the normal monthly management meetings.

8. The Report to the Home Secretary by the Chief Constable of Avon & Somerset, as reported in Police, the Journal of the Police Federation of England and Wales, May 1980, p. 11.
9. Commander Fairburn was the officer in overall command on the ground during the worst of the rioting in Brixton on 11 April 1980. In today’s terms, he would have been the Silver Commander.

10. A Special Patrol Group Unit then consisted of an inspector, 3 sergeants and 30 constables with appropriate transport.

11. A further 10 people were arrested during the following days.

12. I later learned that, as soon as the events began to unravel in Notting Hill, the Central Control Room inspector at New Scotland Yard had instructed a sergeant to sit alongside the constable who was already operating the dedicated radio channel. The sergeant plotted the deployments I was making on a map so, although I did not know it at the time, there was a back-up record of the deployments I was making on the map, which I held on my lap.

13. The three-tiered system of command currently in use in Great Britain was first introduced by the Metropolitan Police in 1986 following the review of the serious riots, which occurred in Brixton and Tottenham in the autumn of 1985.

14. The riot in Red Lion Square arose when various left-wing groups opposed a march by the National Front. During clashes between the police and the left-wing groups, Kevin Gately, a student at Warwick University, became the first demonstrator to die during a riot on the British mainland for over fifty years.


References


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