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The Story of a Volunteer Police Officer

By George Cook, MBE

When my two elder brothers became regular police officers, I knew this was a career which I intended to follow. Sadly when I applied to join I did not pass the very strict eyesight test. I was devastated by this and was advised by the recruiting sergeant to apply to join the Special Constabulary with the hope that my eyesight might improve over time.

I applied and was successful in becoming a probationer special constable in the Southend on Sea Borough Constabulary in December 1963. In the 1960s Southend on Sea Borough Constabulary was the envy of most other UK Police Forces because the local Council made sufficient finances available to the police to ensure that they had excellent equipment etc. E.g. they had tailor made uniforms and Jaguar cars as patrol vehicles. There was a waiting list to join Southend on Sea Borough Constabulary with applicants from all over the country. The Force amalgamated with Essex Police in 1969. I was proud to have marched alongside regular colleagues during the final parade of Southend on Sea Borough Constabulary prior to its amalgamation with Essex Police.



When I joined the Special Constabulary our uniforms and appointments i.e. whistle, truncheon and handcuffs were identical to those of our regular colleagues. Special Constables also had shoulder flashes stating 'Special Constabulary'. Some members of the public rather foolishly called us 'hobby bobbies' and thought we could not arrest them; they soon learnt that we had the same powers as our regular colleagues. These flashes were removed a few years later. Today both regular and Special officers wear the same uniforms and receive identical defensive skills training and pertinent equipment.

One of my brothers was a regular police officer based at Police HQ in Southend so I had to serve at another police station - Westcliff on Sea. My other brother was a regular London Metropolitan police officer. In those days initial training for probationer members of the Special Constabulary consisted of 10 lectures delivered by a regular sergeant. I, like most Special Constables, gained knowledge and skills by going on duty with experienced regular and Special colleagues.

On my first duty I was introduced to the Special Inspector who advised me what was expected of me. He then introduced me to a Special Sergeant who became my mentor for the next year. In those days we did not have radios when on patrol and our only communication with HQ was via a telephone in static



George with his two brothers, 1964

police posts or from agreed meetings with regular or Special supervising officers. If you did not appear at the appointed time either at the police post or agreed meeting place you were in serious trouble. After a few months of going on duty in the company of experienced colleagues I was allowed to patrol on my own. Although night we patrolled in pairs.

Special Constables were not generally liked by regular police officers in the early sixties because the latter were not well paid and Special officers were seen by some as cheap labour. This view amongst many regular officers prevailed until their pay was substantially increased several years later. During this period I persevered, went on duty at least three or four times per week including most Friday and Saturday evenings, when the police were at their busiest and was eventually accepted by the majority of regular officers at Westcliff Police Station as a colleague. I still hoped to become a regular officer in due course.

During the Easter and summer Bank Holidays the police had to mount large operations to deal with the large number of youths (Mods on scooters and Rockers on motor cycles) who descended upon the town to fight each other. Southend on Sea was a Mecca for large numbers of people – often up to 600 coach loads - to descend on the town to get drunk which usually resulted in numerous fights. I think it was in these situations that I became accepted by regular colleagues because I always stood ‘shoulder to shoulder’ with them in public order situations.

In those days we did not have ‘Human Rights Legislation’ etc. to worry about and we would stop these groups at the Borough boundary/railway stations and either stop them entering the town and / or remove their belts and braces which meant they had to walk around with their hands in their pockets, thus not able to fight. We also told shops not to sell them string etc. Obviously we could not do that today but it worked well then and had the full support of the local population.

Most Bank Holiday Mondays in the sixties, seventies and eighties the police would organise special trains to take the large number of trouble makers back to London. I was always on duty during Bank Holidays. It was busy and one got ‘thumped’ on occasions but we – the police – always won the day. As you know the vast majority of British police officers are unarmed and from the date I joined to nearly 2000 our only source of protection was a wooden truncheon which we rarely used, too much paperwork to complete if we used it!

Approximately three years after joining I asked the regular patrol sergeant one night if I could go on duty in a police car. He looked me up and down but did agree and motor patrols became a regular duty for me from then on. I loved the thrill of going on a ‘shout’ on blues and twos and normally managed to get on motor patrols when on duty. Volunteer officers were not allowed to drive police cars but nevertheless we could become the observer to the experienced full-time Officer.

Over the years I made numerous friends in the regular police and this allowed me to team up for a period of about six years as a regular observer on traffic cars. The primary duties were being the control of traffic, catching speeding and drunken drivers and dealing with road accidents many of which resulted in serious injury or death. I never got used to death but over a period of time I learnt to handle the situation far better. There wasn’t any counselling in those days, just a cigarette and a cup of tea back at the Police Station. We also attended the majority of day to day incidents requiring Police attendance e.g. domestic

violence, burglaries, fires to name but a few. I also attended some suicides which were never very pleasant especially those on the railways which were called "one unders".

I was considered a rebel by some of my Volunteer Supervising Officers because I was always going on duty with regular colleagues instead of working with my Special supervisors. I knew I was a rebel but I learnt far more about policing skills this way and still wanted to become a regular officer. This enabled me to become accepted by regular colleagues who I also did most of my socialising with off duty.

Other duties included raids on premises for drugs and underage drinking; policing a wide variety of fetes, carnivals, football matches where on occasions there were serious public order problems. On one occasion we had to call in reinforcements from adjacent county Police Forces and the Metropolitan Police. I also carried out many plain clothes duties in efforts to catch burglars, deal with prostitutes etc. I also attended two aircraft crashes at the local airport. Fortunately no one was seriously injured in either crash.

In the mid-seventies I decided not to consider applying to become a regular because I was well established in my civilian job in merchant banking.



Eventually I was promoted to Special Sergeant and moved to Leigh Police Station. After a few years there I was transferred to Shoebury Police Station and then on promotion to Special Inspector moved to Police HQ in Southend. All three posts were operational policing posts. After several years I was promoted to Special Superintendent with a much larger area of responsibility for volunteer officers and more and more of my time was spent on management issues as opposed to operational policing. However, I took every opportunity to go out on patrol so I could 'keep my feet on the ground'.

In 1998 I was promoted to Deputy Commandant of the Essex Police Special Constabulary working from Force HQ at Chelmsford. For the next six years I worked with the Commandant managing the volunteer officers within Essex Police which numbered approximately 400 officers. During this time there was much more interaction and communication with other police forces in England and Wales and an increasing liaison with Central Government and The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) over the future strategic direction of The Special Constabulary.

In 2004 I was promoted to Chief Officer of the Essex Police Special Constabulary a post which I thoroughly enjoyed until my retirement in 2010. Whilst I loved operational policing (my last major participation in a serious public order situation being in 2005 at the age of sixty when I realised that I was not as young as I used to be for fighting and rolling around on the ground) this role gave me the opportunity along with other colleagues in England and Wales to influence the future strategic direction of volunteer police officers in England and Wales.

In my roles as Deputy Commandant and then Chief Officer I and many of my volunteer colleagues in Essex had important roles in anti-terrorist hijacking exercises and an actual hijacked aircraft at Stansted airport,

which is the designated UK airport for hijacking incidents. I gained a great deal of knowledge about Essex Police / national procedures for dealing with these major incidents. This was to prove extremely useful because when H.M. The Queen presented me with my MBE at Buckingham Palace she asked me how the Police dealt with hijackings at Stansted airport and I was able to provide a “professional answer”



George receives his MBE, 2003

Having a full time paid job and also a demanding role within the Special Constabulary often meant that my social life suffered. I was also fortunate to have understanding girlfriends and employers, the latter allowing me time off from my paid job in order to carry out Police work. (With the current UK and indeed worldwide economic situation this is not as easy to achieve today because employers quite rightly expect “their pound of flesh”).

In 2005 at the age of 60 I decided to take early retirement from my paid job – which reduced my future income considerably - in order to devote my time to the increasing demands of directing the Special Constabulary in Essex whose numbers were approaching 600 together with my important role as Chair of the Association of Special Constabulary Chief Officers (ASCCO). This decision also took in to account that I was also responsible for caring for an increasingly frail elderly Mother.

I strongly believe that managing volunteers requires far more skills, diplomacy and business expertise than managing paid staff. Unless volunteers are handled in a professional and understanding manner they can ‘vote with their feet’. I sat on most major policy making groups within Essex Police and I often had to have robust debate with senior regular Chief Officers when they tried to introduce policies which had not taken into account the ethos and needs of volunteer police officers. I was usually successful in convincing them to amend proposals to cater for the unique needs of volunteers.

For the last two years of my service I spent the majority of my time on national issues in my role as Chair of ASCCO with the day to day management of the Special Constabulary in Essex delegated to my Deputy Chief Officer.

My retirement party was a splendid affair attended by numerous colleagues and friends from Essex and across the country. Several Chief Constables from other Forces attended and amongst many gifts and accolades was a personal letter from The Home Secretary acknowledging my significant contribution to volunteer Policing over 47 years.

Some would say that my greatest achievements within Volunteer Policing were receiving an MBE from the Queen for services to Policing and founding ASCCO.

Yes of course I was tremendously proud of these achievements but for me being accepted as part of UK Policing by numerous Regular and Special colleagues together with helping the public and making numerous lifelong friends were the major rewards.

I would do it all over again. George Cook MBE

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