The Very Model of a Modern Chief Constable

By Martyn Lockwood

The death of Sir John Nightingale, on the 1st October 2002 at the age of 89 years, saw the passing of a man whose name, perhaps more than any other in living memory, was synonymous with the Essex County Constabulary.

John Cyprian Nightingale was born in Brixton, London, in September 1913. His mother died in the 1918 ‘flu epidemic and, when he was five, he moved with his father, younger brother and sister to live with his two grandmothers and three unmarried uncles in a powerfully matriarchal household in south London. He was educated at the Roman Catholic Cardinal Vaughan School, Kensington and University College, London where he obtained an honours degree in Classics. In 1935 he joined the Metropolitan Police as a constable, at a time when University graduates were a rarity in the police service. This was the start of a career that was to last for some 43 years.

Not long after joining, Nightingale was selected to attend the Metropolitan Police College at Hendon, under a scheme that had been introduced by...
Lord Trenchard to train selected individuals for the highest ranks in the police service.

Air Marshall Hugh Trenchard, (regarded by many as the ‘Father of the RAF), had been appointed Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police [1931-1935] at a time of much dissatisfaction in the police service (including a 10 per cent wage cut). Trenchard set about a number of reforms of the police service, including the founding of Hendon Police College.

Trenchard’s idea was to catch the most able young constables, by competitive entry or recommendation, for accelerated promotion. He wished to recruit well-educated young men from public schools, colleges or universities, all with the promise of immediate appointment to the newly created rank of Junior Station Inspector, after successful completion of a two year course at Hendon. The scheme was unpopular with the newly formed Police Federation and was ended in 1935 with Trenchard’s retirement.

Despite his experience as a constable, John Nightingale’s selection as Junior Station Inspector in 1937 meant that he did not entirely escape the criticism of chief constables of the fifties, sixties and seventies, who were drawn from the ‘officer class’ produced by Trenchard’s pre-war Hendon Police College and had little experience of life at the ‘sharp end’.

The emphasis at Hendon was on physical fitness and character building rather than academia and, whilst at Hendon, John Nightingale had a distinguished career, as captain of both rugby and swimming, as well as obtaining ‘firsts’ in Local Government, Constitutional Law and Police History.

After leaving Hendon, he served as a Junior Station Inspector on the East and West End Divisions. In October 1941, whilst he was serving as a Station Inspector at Chelsea Police Station, he was awarded the British Empire Medal for Bravery, when he took part in the rescue of a man trapped in a building as a result of an air raid.

From 1943 until 1945, Nightingale served in the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve. He was commissioned and saw action in the Western Approaches, as an anti-submarine warfare officer, and also the Mediterranean in a destroyer flotilla. He was to describe his war career as ‘quiet and peaceful.’

In 1946, he resumed his police career with the Metropolitan Police and, in March 1948, he was promoted to the rank of Chief Inspector. In 1950, he was appointed to the Directing Staff of the Police College, which was at the time located at Ryton on Dunsmore, where he was to remain for 3 years, after which he took up an appointment as Commandant of the Police Training Centre at Eynsham in Oxfordshire, which was responsible for training raw recruits.

Returning to the Metropolitan Police in 1956, he was later that year promoted to the rank of Chief Superintendent in charge of ‘H’ Division, which included Whitechapel, Mile End, Bethnal Green, Bow, Poplar and Limehouse, which at that time had an establishment of over 800 officers.
In 1958, the Essex County Constabulary decided to appoint a second Assistant Chief Constable for the force, and John Nightingale was appointed to this post on the 1st January 1958, at an annual salary of £1,920 per annum. He was subsequently appointed First Assistant Chief Constable and Deputy to the Chief Constable in March 1959 and, on the retirement of Sir Jonathan Peel, to the post of Chief Constable in 1962, a position he was to hold until his retirement in 1978.

In addition to his BEM, he received a number of honours during his police career. He was awarded the Queen’s Police Medal in 1965 for distinguished service, appointed CBE in 1970 and knighted in 1975. He was a member of many police working parties. He became President in 1973 of the Association of Chief Police Officers and was also Chairman of the Police Council. In this latter post he was instrumental in the negotiations that led to the 1979 Edmund Davies Report, which brought in a new climate of promoting better pay and conditions in the police service. He also saw the amalgamation, in 1969, of the Essex and Southend Borough police forces.

Sir John also served as a Deputy Lord Lieutenant for Essex and as a member of the Parole Board.

In 1947, he had married Patricia Compton and they lived in the house provided for the Chief Constable at Police Headquarters, in what is now the Chief Officers’ accommodation. In an interview in 1973, he said that ‘the trouble with living in a place like this is that you get used to it. When I retire I shall have to move out... A comparable place to this would cost the earth nowadays, so it looks like we shall have to look around for a semi-detached tent or something.’

He was a private man, who tried to keep his personal life separate from his work, which must have been difficult ‘living on the job’. He also had a wonderful sense of humour. He himself recalled the story of going along to a dinner in his full dress regalia, sitting down and being addressed by the guest at his side. “Tell me”, asked the man, “and who are you?” “The Bandmaster,” he replied, quick as a wink. It was not until coffee was being served that the man turned to him and said, “But there isn’t a band.”

Nightingale was a man well respected for his down to earth manner and keenness to make time to regularly visit every one of the rural police stations within Essex, getting to know each station and the officers within them and the problems they faced. He made it quite clear that he saw these men as

With Princess Anne at the opening of the Cadet School 1969.
The Chief Constable's House at
Essex Police Headquarters

the most important part of the force
and would always insist on holding
those at the top accountable for
mistakes, rather than those at the bottom.

Very much influenced by his own time
at university and his experience at
Hendon he introduced, in the 1970s, a
scheme to send two police officers
from Essex each year to study full-time
at Essex University, leaving the choice
of subject to the individual. At the
time, it was far removed from the
popular image of police officers – but
the scheme was adopted by police
forces across the country.

Mr David Stevens, Chief Constable
of Essex Police said, “Sir John will
be remembered with admiration and
fondness. He made an immense
contribution to the police service and
in many other areas. He was the
forerunner of the modern Chief
Constable and set a fine example for
others to follow.”

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