

Aiming high

Five per cent of officers receive specialist training in the use of firearms, but with the number of criminals using guns on the rise there is an increasing need to train more men and women who have what it takes to work in this area. Gary Mason reports

One of the arguments that is often levelled against the routine arming of officers is the huge financial and logistical cost of training and equipment.

It would be both expensive and difficult, of course, but not impossible and there is a clear precedent in UK policing history for such a task. After the large-scale rioting that scarred Britain's inner cities in the early 1980s, tens of thousands of officers needed to be trained to use new riot control tactics and equipment virtually overnight.

In the Met, after the Brixton riots in 1981, the newly opened Hounslow public order training centre was running courses back-to-back and sometimes overlapping to cater for the thousands of officers who had to be trained. No senior officer was exempt – Special Branch, detectives and other specialists all took the course so that everyone had an understanding of public order tactics.

No one is yet suggesting that the same thing is about to happen with firearms training, but the number of firearms officers in many forces is rising and there are similarities in approach. Like public order, firearms training takes place in large, purpose-built centres with students all being exposed to similar scenarios in realis-

tic settings. According to the Home Office, about five per cent of UK officers are authorised to carry firearms and, given the alarming increases in gun crime, that figure looks set to rise further. In large urban forces such as the Met, the proportion of firearms officers is already at seven per cent.

The Police Federation, in the light of its members' views on having more armed back-up for officers, is pressing for increases in the provision of firearms training and for more armed response vehicles. Given the life and death decisions offi-

cers are required to make during firearms incidents, any increase in armed officers represents a massive training commitment for the forces involved. That training requirement has grown more complex with the widespread introduction of less-lethal options for tactical firearms units, such as baton rounds and Taser.

In the Met, for example, a basic-level authorised firearms officer will undergo two weeks of classroom and practical training allowing them to use two types of gun – the Glock handgun and an MP5.

The next level – for those armed response officers crewing vehicles – has an additional two weeks' training while specialist firearms officers undertake a further 10-week course.

All SO19 officers also have to undergo annual refresher courses and examinations in order to retain their firearms 'ticket'.

Meanwhile, increases in the overall number of firearms officers has a knock-on effect on the required number of senior officers who need to be trained to command firearms incidents and last but not least, on the number of trainers.

Highly specialised skill

Firearms duty is also a highly specialised skill within which a range of finer expertise is possible. For example, West Yorkshire Police's firearms training centre in Oulton, near Wakefield, offers a two-week rifle course for firearms officers of above average shooting ability.

The range of subjects covered includes the role of sniper, the theory of rifle shooting and ballistics, characteristics and maintenance of rifle and sights, range, elevation and windage, observations and night-viewing equipment, fieldcraft, camouflage and concealment; judging distances, map and compass work; and the humane destruction of animals. The advanced course extends to eight weeks – a considerable abstraction from

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Patrick Allen/141403

BROAD SCOPE: Firearms duty requires highly specialised skill and training in realistic settings



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ARMED BACK-UP: In response to increases in gun crime, the Police Federation is pressing for more firearms training for specialist officers and for more armed response vehicles

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regular duties. While demand for training has increased, some forces are in a good position to cater for it through purpose-built centres with state-of-the-art equipment and technology.

Some of these effectively act as regional training centres with officers coming from other forces and even other countries to train there.

One of the newest and best known is the Met's £50 million complex in Gravesend, Kent, which can accommodate more than 300 officers at a time. The site covers 9,250 square metres and was built by a private company, Equion, funded through the Government's Private Finance Initiative, using both public and private money.

Armed officers are trained using traditional indoor and outdoor target ranges and simulation technology developed by AIS Ltd. Last year AIS also supplied a £200,000 training simulator for Lothian and Borders Police. The simulator includes a 'shootback cannon' which allows instructors to fire nylon balls at officers, mimicking incoming fire.

West Yorkshire Police's indoor shooting range at Oulton features an overhead computerised monorail target system and a bullet catcher that can stop any bullet up to 0.5 calibre at point-blank range. It was the first of its type to be installed anywhere in Europe. The range equipment also includes a full theatrical lighting set, sound system and a cinetronics judgmental simulator capable of live or invisible laser fire.

The Oulton centre trains officers locally, nationally and internationally, having helped the Czech Republic as part of its pre-accession to the European Union. West Mercia Constabulary has one of the best known training centres in the

country offering a selection of national courses.

The centre includes a purpose-built live-fire judgement training facility with cinema screens which surround the students, enveloping them in the scenario. It also has the ability to become interactive where officers deal with live projected images of an incident taking place simultaneously in an adjoining range.

While purpose-built ranges are ideal for putting large numbers of firearms officers through the same scenario-based courses, they still require officers to travel and remain at the centre, adding to the abstraction time spent away from operational duties.

Laser fire

Some forces are experimenting with portable solutions to try and get round this problem. West Mercia Constabulary, for example, has a judgmental suite simulator that uses laser pulse-firing weapons.

One of the attractions of the system is that it is portable and can be used at other venues.

The US companies Laser Shot and Firearms Training Systems are among a number who specialise in small, portable simulators. In the US, for example, firearms officers working in their normal area could attend Laser Shot training during their duty shift and be back on the streets, having completed the required training package. The company has now adapted its US-based scenarios for UK training purposes, having consulted UK firearms trainers.

The company's UK distributor has built up a library of pre-recorded video scenarios suitable for UK training. With the optional software police forces are able to shoot their own scenarios,

DIFFICULTY RECRUITING

According to the HM Inspectorate of Constabulary's report on gun crime published last year, *Guns, Community and Policing*, some forces have had difficulty recruiting sufficient firearms officers given 'recent high-profile incidents involving armed officers and the potential consequences that follow armed operations'. This meant that while some officers were willing to undertake firearms training they were not prepared to become part of full-time units.

Research undertaken by the Metropolitan Police Authority indicated that firearms officers were liable to be removed from operational duty for periods of between eight months and four years while incidents were investigated.

While simulation training has got increasingly realistic and technology allows instructors to measure a student's response in minute detail, nothing can prepare officers for dealing with the consequences of their actions.

Research in the US shows that a substantial number of police shootings – particularly those involving unarmed suspects – occur at night or in a darkened setting, yet few law-enforcement agencies train their officers how to shoot under those conditions.

Meanwhile, with public and legal scrutiny of police shooting incidents becoming more intensive, technology has been developed that could increase the pressure on firearms officers to account for their actions.

The Accu-Counter is a 'black box recorder' that has the ability to record and store a record of every shot fired from a firearm, with the time (to 1/1000th of a second) and date the shot was fired. This data is stored and transmitted via infrared data transfer using the Accu-Counter IR reader to any handheld or personal computer, where it can be evaluated.

The manufacturers say that the device can be fitted to most weapons used by law enforcement agencies and will be useful for inventory control of firearms and ammunition and training assessments. But it is also being promoted as a way of reconstructing events following a shooting incident, especially when witness testimony is conflicting or inconsistent.

download it into the system and use it within minutes. Laser Shot UK is also able to film, edit and branch new footage using their specialist filming and editing team. ■

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