


Ensuring the safety of police officers

 It has taken more than two years for the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the brutal murder of DC Stephen Oake to come to light. With hindsight, it is possible to say that this was a murder that could have been avoided, but it would be wrong to blame individuals for serious mistakes that were made in the planning, preparation and execution of the operation.

The Oake case is a sad example of the risks frontline officers can face. Another officer who was stabbed three times in this incident, has been forced to retire. How many more fatalities are required before the top echelons of the police service get the message about body armour and make sure it is fit for purpose, wearable and compulsory?


As with the murder of Ian

Broadhurst in Leeds, the failure to handcuff an extremely dangerous suspect played a part in the ultimate tragedy. Mike Todd, the chief constable of GMP, has now added his voice to the pressure from the Federation and others for the service to adopt a general policy of handcuffing all crime suspects at the moment of arrest. Home Secretary Charles Clarke rejected this, but in the light of the Oake case, the Government is duty bound to reconsider. Mr Todd has also said that since the force has tightened up its procedures in counter-terrorism operations, he has been criticised by community leaders for alleged heavy handedness. This, he says, "shows the balance we have to strike". The balance to seek is that which ensures the safety of the public and the police.



Tony Judge, founder of *Police* magazine in 1968

For Harry Roberts 'life' should mean 'life'

 The argument over whether or not the police killer, Harry Roberts, is being deprived of his "human rights" by being kept in gaol has nothing to do with the appalling crimes he committed. It is about his "right" to be released. For the great majority of the public, and certainly for the police, the community has the human right to demand that Roberts stays behind bars.

August 12, 1966, was a glorious summer's day. In a quiet London street, as children played nearby, three unarmed police officers were shot dead in the space of a few seconds. They were on a routine patrol in an unmarked vehicle when they decided to check the occupants of a car, possibly because it was parked near Wormwood Scrubs Prison and a series of spectacular escapes from that gaol had focussed attention on prison

security.

The occupants were three small-time criminals who were looking for opportunities to commit robberies and had obtained revolvers for the purpose. As two of the officers approached, the gang leader, Harry Roberts, said, "If they find the guns we'll go down for years." Without hesitation, Roberts, opened fire and shot dead Sgt Christopher Head and PC David Wombwell. Another criminal, John Duddy, ran to the police car and killed the driver, PC Geoffrey Fox, before he could use the radio.


The murders took place within months of Parliament's decision to end capital punishment. Six police officers were murdered in 1966, the highest number of any year in the century. The trial judge told the killers that their mandatory life sentences, "may well be treated as meaning exactly what they say."

This reflected Government undertakings given to the police service and Parliament when hanging was abolished. Times have changed and so have attitudes to crime and punishment, but the community has enough on its plate without having

Roberts back on the streets. I am writing this before the April hearings of the Parole Board, (and possibly a later reference to the European Court) but my regretful forecast is that a cold-blooded murderer will soon be at large once more.



Forgiveness

 If there is one ray of light to emerge from the death of Stephen Oake, it is the remarkable example set by his wife, Lesley, and their three children. This devoutly Christian family actually prays every day for Stephen's killer. Lesley attended every day of the murder trial, and says her only feelings towards the killer were sadness that things had gone so wrong for him. Such

a reaction is, of course, exceptional, and many relatives of other officers who have died in the line of duty have very different feelings about their murderers. They cannot forgive, and no one can expect them to. But the Oake family have shown, by their bearing throughout their ordeal, just why Stephen Oake was so respected throughout the force.

