


Basic instincts

Hertfordshire Constabulary has designed a course to teach probationers how to deal with major incidents from a terrorist attack to rail crashes. As part of the training, officers are encouraged to think like a terrorist, helping them to develop the 'basic instincts' of experienced officers.

Tina Orr-Munro reports.

 No-one questioned the two men loitering outside the administrative headquarters of a pharmaceutical company known for animal testing. No-one made the connection between the disused mortars purchased over the internet and the planned mortar attack on the building. No-one thought twice about the white van bought hundreds of miles away which would be used to launch the missiles. The only thing left to do was to carry out the attack.

Fortunately for this company, the animal extremists are, in fact, a group of probationer police officers carrying out an exercise to help them identify real terrorists. The mortars and the van were never bought, but they could have been, say the officers taking part in the exercise.

'No-one questioned us at any point in the operation. We found most of what we needed on the internet. We were amazed at how easy it was to get hold of deactivated mortars, fertilizer, and the all

the other components needed to launch the attack,' says PC James Barratt.

Laying the foundations

Exercise Vigilant takes place at the end of Hertfordshire Constabulary's two-week Policing Serious Incidents course which aims to prepare young-in-service officers for the realities of policing in a post 9/11 world.

The course, the only one of its kind in the country according to the force, was specially developed by a force trainer for frontline probationary officers who could easily be the first officer at the scene of a major incident such as a rail disaster, mass shooting or even a terrorist attack.

In a force that has had to contend with both the Hatfield and Potters Bar rail crashes in recent years, it is highly feasible that an officer with less than two years service could be the first on the scene of a major disaster.

'The public see uniformed



Awareness: An example of a homemade bomb device

PREPARING PROBATIONERS

patrol officers as the frontline of policing. They have high expectations of them, especially in regards to counter-terrorism. These officers could finish the course this week and be faced with a rail disaster next. They need to know what to do,' says the course's author who, for operational reasons, asked not to be named.

Back to basics

And the much-welcomed influx of relatively young officers has also led to deterioration in traditional policing skills, another area the course seeks to rectify.

'We don't have officers on the streets with 20 years experience. In common with other forces we have high percentages of probationers. We have to look at ways in which we can skill these people as early as possible.

'What the frontline has lost is suspicion, some of the younger officers are not scratching below the surface, they are taking what they are told at face value. We are a service of form-fillers. This course is a way of giving them an instinctive approach to looking below the surface.'

In a nutshell, the PSI course teaches new recruits about 'all the things that are likely to kill you or a member of the public, or put you in serious danger.'

It forms part of COMPASS, the force's probationer training programme, and represents a major departure from the way training is traditionally delivered.

It also hits a total of 13 of the 22 National Occupational Standards for a police officer, as well as covering one of the five National Policing Objectives for 2005 to 2008, to counter-terrorism.

Another unusual step was to bring in Dennis Humphreys who contributed to several of the lessons. Mr Humphreys is a retired police officer, now employed by the Police Associates Register. He worked as a national trainer at Bruche police training college for the last four years of his service. He says the advantage of being an external trainer is that you are able to be objective about the needs of the officers without being caught up in internal politics.

On average, officers taking part have just twelve months in the job with four to six months

experience of being out on the streets. There are approximately twenty students on each course, which runs every six weeks.

Each element of course is broken down into parts. There is the didactic input followed by practical demonstrations and exercises. As the course instructor says: 'We show them the pictures, tell them the words and then we get them to do it themselves.'

First on the scene

Counter-terrorism occupies the second half of the course, but the rest of it focuses on a range of major incidents where officers could find themselves the first on the scene and must react quickly and effectively.

The first week is dominated by firearms and major incidents, which the instructors are determined to make as relevant as possible to officers.

The 1987 Hungerford massacre where gunman Michael Ryan shot and killed 16 people in the sleepy Berkshire town is the starting point for the course. There are two reasons for this, says the instructor.

'We use this as a basis, looking at the issues arising from Hungerford in terms of the police response, linking firearms, major incidents and officer safety, but it also gives them an enormous sense of how things have moved on,' he says.

Probationers learn about the different types of guns that are on the streets of Hertfordshire and receive basic instruction on ballistics.

'It is about educating them. For example, we can debunk some of the myths about sawn-off shotguns or demonstrate the difference between a short-barrelled shotgun and a long-barrelled shotgun. They need to know antique guns can still kill you. But perhaps the most important element they learn is there is no such thing as 'it is', we teach them that 'it looks like.'

Different ammunition is also examined to give officers an idea of the sort of weapon it is likely to have come from. This may help

them identify weapons traditionally used by terrorists and not criminals, say the instructors. Officers also have the chance to experience what a gunshot sounds like and trainers even shoot into their body armour (not while they are wearing it) to give them that extra reassurance that it will stop a bullet.

The firearms module is followed by input from specialist officers, who are not trainers, another strength of the course.

'Anyone of these officers may find themselves covering a rail disaster next week. That is why we bring in officers from the air support unit, search teams, SOCO, and the dog section, as we wanted the

people doing the job to deliver the training.

'By using specialists, it makes the training more credible, practical and up to date,' says the trainer, who also trained as a firearms officer and was able to provide a valuable input into the course when he joined the training department 18 months ago.

The end of the week one culminates in a day of live scenarios where officers are sent to situations they may be faced with in their every day working lives.

Once again the aim is for realism. As officers experience the live scenarios their supervisor quizzes them on which powers they





Expecting the unexpected

PC James Barratt and PC Mark Barnard are typical of the probationers on the course. They each have 18 months service. They had just 24 hours to identify a terrorist target and plan their attack down to the finest detail, from funding it to how they would escape. Both officers were surprised at the ease of planning the operation.

PC Barnard says: 'Everything we needed, including information about our intended target was on the internet. By the end of the 24 hours we had planned the attack which is incredible when you think that a terrorist cell may take months to plan an operation.'

His colleague, PC Barratt, adds: 'We were absolutely amazed by the lack of interest in us. At no time were we ever challenged.'

Officers present their operation to the rest of the class and then they are asked to resume their role as officers and view their findings from a policing perspective. Both officers found the course invaluable.

'It has changed the way I think. If I see cars parked up on night shift I do take a closer look and ask whether or not they should be there,' says PC Barratt.

An evaluation by Michelle Bradford, the force training evaluator, has revealed that officers find the course extremely relevant and useful to their roles.

She says: 'The training proved effective at providing practical policing advice for probationers. With police experience deteriorating on areas, the course offers practical tips and guidance for police officers, guidance probationers are not receiving on shifts.'

'During the debrief students were so enthusiastic about the training they suggested sending more experienced officers on refresher training. The students described an improved confidence to approach members of the public and interact with them.'

'The students appreciated the training provided by force experts in firearms, dog unit and staff protection. A three-month review of training revealed that many have used their knowledge gained on the course. Search techniques have been used by 44 per cent of students. Arrests for stop and search have risen from 6 to 22 per cent,' she says.

The course instructors are aware that it will take time for all officers to benefit from the course, which is why they have encouraged those who have already completed it to pass on their knowledge to their colleagues.

And as the trainers prepared for the next course, they are convinced of its value. 'It is really about making sure our officers are prepared for the unexpected whether that is a terrorist attack or a major incident. That is the least we can do.'

PC Manjit Kaur, 23 years old.

'I completed the course in October 2004. Two months later, I was on a night shift on mobile patrols. We were patrolling commercial premises, which were possible targets for burglaries when we came across a parked vehicle. We spoke to the passengers. Their ID seemed suspicious and we ran a PNC check on the vehicle, which linked it to credit card fraud. They were all arrested and 30 to 40 cards were seized. Part of the course looked at how terrorist organisations using card swiping as a means of raising funds and as a result of this I was immediately suspicious about these particular people and raised with the sergeant from the local station. I later found out that two of the people arrested had links with a terrorist organisation. I really don't think that it would have crossed my mind, if I hadn't gone through this course. It was spot on and without it I wouldn't have had a clue what to do.'



Probationer planning

Credit: Andrew Carruth

should use so they are constantly switching from role play to real life.

'This keeps the pressure on them. The scenarios are kept secret and changed frequently which also adds to their value and means the officers really don't know what they are going into, just like real life.'

The second week concentrates on all aspects of domestic and international terrorism, including avenues of funding. By the end, officers are put into small groups

and given just 24 hours to meticulously plan their own terrorist attack.

'This approach allows officers to try and think like a terrorist. Terrorists don't consider themselves criminals, but see themselves as soldiers fighting for a rightful cause. This is not about respecting them, it's about getting inside their minds and understanding the way they behave and why they behave like that.'

