



Photography: Lancashire Police.co.uk

Honoured: ACC Wendy Walker

# Medal of honour

Many police officers were awarded for their services to policing in the New Year Honours list, Tina Orr Munro speaks to one senior officer in Lancashire featured in the list who was involved in the investigation into the horrific deaths of the Chinese cockle pickers

If it hadn't been for the deaths of 23 cockle pickers on February 5, 2004, Wendy Walker, assistant chief constable, says she probably would never have applied to join chief officer ranks.

The Lancashire officer who has just been awarded the QPM in the New Year Honours list for her long and distinguished service to Lancashire Constabulary was working as divisional commander for northern division when the call came through that a number of cockle pickers had got into trouble and drowned off Morecombe Bay.

Although she did not know it at the time, the night 23 Chinese immigrants

lost their lives was to become a defining moment in her career.

"At the time I was happy where I was, but their deaths and the subsequent investigation had a massive impact on all of us, both professionally and personally," she says.

The workers, mainly from China's Fujian province were working illegally when they were caught by a rising tide off Hest Bank in Morecambe Bay late one evening in February.

A frantic mobile phone call from one of them alerted the emergency services, but by the time they reached the scene they were only able to save one person. A total of 21 bodies, of men and women

between the ages of 18 and 45, were recovered from the bay. It emerged that most had tried to swim to shore but had been overcome by hypothermia. Four of the victims died after the truck they used to reach the cockling area was overwhelmed by water. A further two cocklers are believed to have been among those drowned, but their bodies were never found. Fourteen other members of the group made it safely to the shore, making 15 survivors in total.

For ACC Walker who has spent her entire policing career with Lancashire Constabulary the incident is probably responsible for her decision to pursue further promotion.

“I don’t think I would have gone on to become a chief officer if it hadn’t been for what happened. The investigation had such broad implications.”

Recalling the incident, ACC Walker says her first thoughts when she was told about the tragedy were ‘what does a divisional commander do in these circumstances?’ As she points out, nothing like this had ever happened before.

In fact, she immediately went to the mortuary to offer her support to her staff that had worked all night battling to save the cockle pickers and then dealing with the horrific aftermath.

“From the mortuary I went to the lifeboat men who were washing down their boats. They were absolutely devastated because, of course, they were used to pulling live people from the water. Then I went to the survivors’ centre to meet the Chinese survivors.” She says the incident which played out across the world’s media changed her as a police officer. “I actually grew up as a divisional commander. For years I understood the theory of community engagement, but for me this was the reality.

“These people had been living in our

community and to be honest, some had been involved in anti-social behaviour. Then there was talk of triad involvement. This was the practical end of community engagement. I learnt an enormous amount and I took that forward with me.”

Following the investigation, five people were found guilty of charges including conspiracy to commit facilitation and conspiracy to pervert the course of justice. Lin Liang Ren, 29, was found guilty of 21 counts of manslaughter, guilty of conspiracy to commit facilitation and guilty of conspiracy to pervert the course of justice. Zhao Xiao Qing, 21, was found guilty of conspiracy to commit facilitation and conspiracy to pervert the course of justice. Lin Mu Yong, 31, was found guilty of conspiracy to commit facilitation.

Six years on, ACC Walker now leads the forces’ people portfolio. She has enjoyed a long and varied career with Lancashire Constabulary.

In 2005 she was seconded to Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary in Wakefield and then, in December 2007, she became assistant chief constable, territorial divisions and criminal justice before taking up her

current role. She also leads, nationally, on probationer police officer training and development, as well as being a qualified hostage negotiator.

In 2011 ACC Walker is due to retire, but she hopes to continue to serve the people of Lancashire. But with 18 months left in service, the senior officer says there is still much to be done as the police service enters turbulent times. However she is confident the force can weather the storm.

“We’ve done our preparation for the financial situation. That doesn’t mean to say it will be easy. There will be job losses. It will be tough, but we will adapt,” she says.

ACC Walker adds that news of the QPM came as a complete surprise.

“I am absolutely thrilled to receive this award. It is a real honour. It came completely out of the blue. But when I receive the award I will be doing so on behalf of all the staff at Lancashire Constabulary. No-one working in the emergency services works in isolation.”

For a full list of officers honoured click on:  
[http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/N11/Newsroom/DG\\_183673](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/N11/Newsroom/DG_183673)

Hest Bank in Morecambe Bay

