

Counselling Cumbria

The countryside of west Cumbria was the scene of a horrific massacre in which 12 people were shot and killed and many injured. This echoes the shootings carried out in Hungerford more than a decade ago. The repercussions have an impact on whole communities, but how do police officers, often first on the scene, deal with such traumas? Syreeta Lund reports



Many police officers called to the scene of killer Derrick Bird's rampage across the Cumbrian countryside were unarmed and without body armour to protect themselves. Despite this, they pursued the 52-year-old to try to put an end to his trail of terror, only taking cover when he directed the gun at them and threatened to shoot.

Yet, following the events that unravelled and left many in the community devastated, reports in the national media questioned whether the response had been rapid enough.

Traumatic events such as this can leave communities in mourning and shock and, as members of that community who are often more involved than the average bystander, police officers can also find themselves seriously affected by what they have seen.

Duncan Fisher is a discipline liaison officer at Cumbria. He also works in Cumbria Police Federation's office and was a critical incident de-briefer. He says the feeling among officers was initially one of shock, then one of anger when police officers' actions were being questioned by the media.



(Left, top) Officers at the woods where Cumbrian gunman Derrick Bird killed himself after a shooting spree that left 12 people dead and many others injured (Left) Floral tributes to one of Bird's victims, local farmer and rugby player Garry Purdham



“Someone was shot every six minutes in reality so events were happening very quickly. While police officers were attempting to locate this person they had 30 major crime scenes to supervise; we couldn’t just drive by, and leave those who were critically injured or dying.”

“Police officers are part of the community, we are all in it together and we all felt the same. The police response was rapid from the first time we got to know about it. Someone was shot every six minutes in reality so events were happening very quickly. While police officers were attempting to locate this person they had 30 major crime scenes to supervise; we couldn’t just drive by, and leave those who were critically injured or dying,” he tells *Police* magazine.



(Top) An officer guards the scene as one of Bird’s victims lays dead under the green blanket, and (above) Cumbria chief constable Craig Mackey at a press conference with a map showing the gunman’s route

“The thing that really helped was that people sent cards thanking us for saving them; one little girl sent a card to Whitehaven police station to thank them. We don’t know how many lives were saved; all the focus is on what went wrong. We do not mind learning lessons from what happened, but this

can be done without having to point the finger of blame.”

Duncan says: “Every officer showed great bravery. They were coming across seriously injured victims and murder scenes before progressing to find the person responsible who could have been anywhere.”

Officers who are suffering from the trauma of an event can be referred to one of 11 counsellors who provide a confidential service to those who need it. It's a big cultural change to days gone by when officers were simply expected to 'get on with it'. Duncan attended a debrief after the Lockerbie bombing, just to hear one commander say, "any of you woosey boys need counselling?"

"Things have changed over time," adds Duncan. "It is now acceptable that police officers are human and may need to talk to someone."

He stresses that the Federation can help to point officers in the right direction if they feel they may need further help or to just simply speak to someone.

Any officer who feels they may just want to speak to someone can call Cumbria Police Federation offices on 01768 217426

Echoes of horror – the Hungerford shootings

On August 19, 1987, Michael Ryan left a trail of devastation in his wake as he killed 16 people in and around the small historic town of Hungerford, West Berkshire.

John Coppen, an acting sergeant at the time, and Erica Law, then still in her probation, discovered his first victim – mother-of-two Susan Godfrey, who was shot down in front of her young children. The events of that day have stayed with both officers who eventually went to seek counselling years later.

John is now deputy general secretary of the Police Federation's Sergeants' Central Committee. He is a federation representative for Wiltshire, where Erica is the federation secretary. The officers were based in Swindon when the radio call came through reporting that a lady had found two children wandering in the forest saying their mummy had been shot.

"I knew the area very well and it sounded extremely unusual. Any firearms incidents in the area were usually related to farmers or domestics," says John.



Photography: Dave Caulkin/Press Association

Officers run towards the scene of shootings in Hungerford in August 1987, when gunman Michael Ryan killed 16 people before shooting himself. Among those who died was Thames Valley PC Roger Brereton, who was responding to reports of gunfire

He then grabbed colleague Erica Law for help, and took a police car to the hospital where the woman had taken the two children, who were aged just two and four. "The little girl just kept saying a man in green had shot their mum; they had obviously seen what had happened. She had managed to get them back into the car before she was shot," says Erica.

The little girl had unbuckled her brother after the shooting and that's when they were found walking around. After speaking with the woman who found the children, John and Erica went to the scene in Savernake forest, around ten miles from Hungerford, where the family had been having a picnic before planning to go to their grandmother's birthday party.

Erica had only been in her job as a

police officer for less than a year when she was faced with dealing with the horrific sight of the first victim.

John says: "We found Susan Godfrey's car with a handbag still on the front seat and decided to look in the forest nearby."

Erica remembers the presents for the grandmother's birthday still in the car and the state of the body when they discovered it; wire that had been dumped on the forest floor had wrapped around her legs as she had tried to run away from her killer.

"I found Susan Godfrey; her eyes were open and I turned her over to give her mouth to mouth. I thought I saw a movement, but I soon realised she was dead," recalls John.

At this stage no one knew where Ryan had gone and he could well have been in the wood. Many police officers, as

in Cumbria, were walking into potentially lethal situations without being armed or protected by body armour. Both officers struggled to get radio contact as the reception was particularly bad and the airwaves jammed with officers calling with news of yet another victim.

They were eventually told to stay with the body until back-up arrived but Erica says this period felt like hours, particularly with the threat that Ryan maybe hiding behind a tree near the officers. "I remember the feeling of dread when a branch snapped or we heard a noise," she says.

Eventually other officers turned up and the scene was secured, but the pair went back to the hospital in the afternoon and ended up looking after the two children until their father could be contacted.

"We had to keep them away from the television, they were potential witnesses to the crime. The four-year-old girl was very bright and was trying to explain to her two-year-old brother that mummy was with the angels," John tells *Police* magazine. "Their mother had deliberately led Ryan away from the car they were sitting in to protect them.

"It was a horrific experience, and years later I would find myself inexplicably speaking to a counsellor



Photography: Dave Caulkin/Press Association

Some of the weapons used by Ryan, on display during a police press conference

about the colour of the hairclip the little girl had worn."

John became involved in Federation work not too long after the incident and says it was "no accident" as many police officers were not catered for, no one even asked if they were okay.

Three or four months after the incident Erica was out on patrol on a routine job in the evening, checking out the area around the back of some business premises. "I just found I was

scared of the dark and couldn't go in the building; I'd never felt like that before, things were not quite right."

However, it would be five or six years before she would see a counsellor and realise the impact the event had.

"Those haunting hours have never left me, even 25 years later."

Erica has written to Cumbria chief constable Craig Mackey, who she began her service with as a police officer back in the 1980s, to urge him to provide support for officers as early as possible.

It's not about fixing broken people

Ben Lacey is an NLP (neuro-linguistic programming) coach who retired as a firearms instructor from the Met's SO19 unit two years ago. He is also a trained hypnotherapist. He says that officers or staff directly involved in or on the peripheries of distressing events like Cumbria can feel the impact.

"Quite often police officers can get involved in something and then just keep thinking about it after the event, and how they think about it is key. People can be very disappointed in themselves – what they think they should or should not have done – and potentially blame themselves or the organisation they work for."

He says that NLP counsellors try to help officers re-structure how they think about an event to help them deal with it in a different way, and that this can halt the need for officers to have to go for long-term counselling.

Mr Lacey says there are a number of signs that can be an indication someone is struggling to deal with trauma such as wavering confidence or anger, quite often directed at an organisation.

"They may feel people have not given them enough time or listened to them and this is their reality, I just get them to think about it differently."

He adds: "The people I speak to are not 'broken', therefore I don't try to 'fix them'. I am just enabling them to use the resources they have got, and teaching them to think differently about what they have experienced."

Helping to deal with trauma

Erica Law is now a TRiM (Trauma Risk Management) assessor in Wiltshire. This is a peer-led system which supports officers who have been through particularly difficult trauma.

TRiM assessors carry out assessments; they are non-medical and are trained in basic trauma psychology and post-incident management. Assessors will speak to officers to look at how individuals are coping with a traumatic event; although it is a psychological risk assessment, it's not half as scary as it sounds.

Erica explains: "I just have a cup of tea with them, and ask a few questions about how they are feeling."

The assessment is usually done within 48 hours of the event, and consists of ten questions which help to assess how someone is coping, for example asking how someone is sleeping after a traumatic incident.

After around a month, the assessor will go back to the officer and see if there has been any change, and assess how they are managing to deal with the trauma. They will provide any practical support for the officer, but will also then signpost those who are struggling to cope to further help such as welfare or medical services.