



Photography: Andrew Carruth

# Mean streets

In the wake of the shocking murders of three young teenagers gunned down in London, Syreeta Lund joins the firearms officers in the Met's CO19 branch for an exclusive insight into their role

As I sat in the back of an armed response vehicle, body armour at the ready, I had a brief shot of adrenaline and slight fear as we sped through winding streets towards Hackney. Minutes earlier, a voice from the control room had come through on the radio, giving details of two shots being fired in a residential street – a number of passers-by had called in to report the exchange.

PC Mark Williams is at the wheel, speedily weaving his way through the labyrinthine traffic-choked streets of central London. Sgt Mick Burke is in the front passenger seat, and with the help of a GPS system, he navigates us to the scene as quickly as possible.

We often have to nip across to the other side of the road to get through the congestion and while I'm concentrating on keeping my breakfast down, the officers are focusing on making sure we get to the job fast and in one piece. Cars dart in opposite directions as the drivers try to work out where the siren is coming from.

When we arrive in Hackney not too many people bat an eyelid; it is one of the worst areas for gun crime alongside Lambeth and Southwark.

It emerges from intelligence that it's likely to be two cars doing a drive-by shooting on each other, possibly rival gangs. The offenders have made off, it's not clear if



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anyone has been shot, but the officers tell me it is quite common for gangs to bundle a wounded gang member covered in blood out of their car at the doors of a hospital 30 minutes later. They don't want to be caught at the scene, particularly not with a gun or drugs on them.

As we drive the streets looking for the vehicles described by witnesses - extremely common makes and colours - it is difficult to identify them without a full registration number. As we pull up at some traffic lights, a motorcyclist pulls alongside and knocks on the window, Sgt Burke winds down the window and finds that the rider is a witness; he tells them that a gun was pointed directly at his head, he had just been riding past the scene.

This is the kind of job that is an everyday occurrence for CO19 officers. This is the official name given to the Met's Specialist Firearms Command which primarily provides support for the majority of unarmed officers across London when firearms are involved.

Earlier on during the day we are called to a location near to Hampton Court Railway Station, after reports that a group of four 'hoodies,' around 14 years old, had pulled out a firearm. At this stage it is not clear if it is a real firearm or an imitation. It is common for firearms officers to be called when replicas and imitation guns are involved, the public cannot tell the difference and it is almost impossible for firearms officers to tell the difference; they could be real and they cannot take a risk that they are fake.

It is a bit of a distance to make the job and there are other armed response vehicles (ARVs) making their way to the scene, but the sirens begin and my colleague and I again resign ourselves to the rollercoaster ride of queasiness as we dart to the next job.

When we get to the scene, there are two ARVs on site. There are four youths who have been split up and are talking to police officers and firearms officers, no weapon can be found and it has probably been dumped, according to the officers. It emerges that two traffic wardens initially made the call to the police. One of the youths had told them they 'better not even think about putting a ticket on a car' as it belonged to one of them and then pulled out a black pistol.

I am wary of leaving the car, even wearing body armour, and the photographer stays close to get some snaps. These officers face the possibility of getting killed every day, but they do the job because they believe they are keeping the public safe and helping the UK to remain one of the few police forces who are not routinely armed. Their biggest fear, they tell me, is when

something does go wrong – they believe their life or someone else’s is under threat and they shoot. They are automatically under investigation and could be suspended for months, even years.

“I have the best job in the world,” says PC Williams, who is also a federation representative and has helped officers in the aftermath of 28 shootings, nine of them fatal. “I hope the fact I have dealt with so many shootings and seen what officers go through, yet I’m still in the job, gives them some confidence.”

Do they ever worry they could go out on a job and not come back? Do their wives or kids ever worry?

“Yes,” comes the reply from both officers, but they understand it’s part of the job. The officers believe in what they do. “We protect the public and unarmed officers and we like to think we bring offenders to justice,” is the unanimous reply.

### CO19 – The department

The Met branch gets 13,000 call outs a year relating to firearms incidents – around 30 to 40 calls per day in the capital – these could be gang-related killings or shoot outs to imitation firearms.

More recently, CO19, which keeps itself fairly low-key and avoids a great deal of media attention, was hurled into the spotlight following the aftermath of the three violent deaths of teenagers in South London within the space of just 11 days.

Billy Cox was gunned down in his bedroom, aged 15, James Smarrt-Ford, 16, at Streatham Ice Rink and 15-year-old Michael Dosunmu in his own home in Peckham.

Supt Bert Moore, heads the operational side of CO19, and has been in the branch for more than three years. He put himself through initial firearms training when he took up the post to get a feel for ‘what it’s like to stand in the shoes of a firearms officer’.

He believes gun crime is likely to increase over the next five to ten years in the UK.

“We follow the trends of the US. It would suggest we will see more firearms appearing on the streets. We may see an increase in gangs as for youngsters the gangs become like a surrogate family.

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There are 552 officers all in CO19 and the department is split into four: armed response vehicles (ARV), tactical support teams (TST), specialist firearms officers (SFO) and firearms instructors. Supt Moore’s role is to manage the teams and the day-to-day strategic direction of the branch. “I basically find the resources, make sure the officers are briefed and get them out there.”

Resources are a key issue for CO19, as for many other





departments in the Met, also suffering from funding cuts. The cuts in the branch will have to be taken from officers' overtime, but many of the proactive operations they are involved in depend on officers putting in extra hours.

Supt Moore says that the cuts will have an impact on proactive operations to try to reduce gun crime in areas such as South London where the gang-style killings took place.

Most gun crime is concentrated in the inner city boroughs. The ARV teams' average travel time to get to a call is 10.9 minutes from being assigned. Their average time for pan-London calls is within 12 minutes, 83 percent of calls are answered within this time. These are not targets but just give an indicator that the unit is putting the cars in the right places.

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As well as the 13,000 call outs that ARVs attend, they also carried out more than 80 proactive operations, such as patrols in key gun crime areas last year. Tactical support teams were involved in 269 operations last year with the specialist firearms teams involved in 435.

Officers in CO19 believe the proactive operations are having an effect as a deterrent to gangs with guns. PC Mark Williams says that many youngsters involved

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in the gangs recognise the firearms cars because of the yellow dots in the windscreens. They know they are dealing with officers who are armed.

“Gang members do seem to be getting younger and they see the older ones as role models. These people are hardened criminals and they see a gun as an accessory like a mobile phone. When we went out on duty there was a youth of around 12 years old involved in a serious crime and we are talking about young people around 14 years old.

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