

Crossing the divide

Only three decades ago many female police officers were pushed into traditional roles in the service. Syreeta Lund talks to two officers who hope to encourage more females into traditionally male roles.

Sgt Phaedra Coulson - firearms officer

If you work in an office, chances are the most life-threatening situation you can get into involves a boiling cup of coffee, your boss's lap and a bad case of the hangover shakes. Sgt Phaedra Coulson provides static armed protection to dignitaries, armed high-risk prisoner escorts and carries out occasional armed response and other duties. It has to take some guts and determination to do a job like hers.

Sgt Coulson, who has recently passed her inspectors' exam, said: "I don't know why we haven't got that many women; it's something our force is looking at. Speaking personally, firearms are just something I have always been interested in. I was always interested in cars, motorbikes and firearms."

The 34-year-old officer works within the Thames Valley Police Protection Group, part of the Tactical Support Department. She has been with the force for 12 years and a sergeant for nearly six





Sgt Coulson: aiming high

years, becoming a firearms officer in February 2005. She says the force's firearms departments were open-minded and encouraged her to apply, as long as she reached the standards required. "Several officers encouraged me to consider it. They were happy to speak about it and tell me what was involved," she adds.

Static Protection was recommended to Sgt Coulson as a good way to learn basic firearms tactics as it can be difficult going straight into an Armed Response Vehicle or Close Protection role as a supervisor if you have not gained experience as a PC.

"When you initially apply to be a firearms officer in our force, you must pass a medical, fitness test and a basic firearms assessment to check you are not 'gun-shy' and can hit the target," says Sgt Coulson. The fitness test includes the bleep test at a minimum of 8.6 for a firearms officer, where the probationer level is 5.4.

In Thames Valley Police there are 85 officers on the Protection Group, five of which are full-time female officers and one part-time. Two of the officers work on the Close Protection unit. On the Tactical Firearms Group there are three female officers out of approximately 80.

Sgt Coulson believes things are changing in relation to the gender divide: "There are more women going into specialist roles, they are filtering

through. Years ago women were put in domestic violence units and weren't even allowed out on patrol."

Is there anything she believes might put women off the role? She replies: "There are women I thought would be very good at the job, I have encouraged them to think about it, but some women are just not interested in firearms. Some people just do not want to shoot someone, whereas I think if someone else, or me, or a member of the public are in danger and you have been given the right training, it should prepare you for that. If that needs to happen, that's why we are there."

Family commitments can also be an issue for women contemplating joining firearms. Sgt Coulson has not yet had children but is thinking about starting a family. She says: "Family is definitely also a consideration for some women. Some women are worried about their family if they have children they wonder whether they can give the time and commitment"

But, in relation to her own role on the Protection Group, the stereotype that the job is a male preserve is nonsense. With the right traits and determination, gender is not an issue. "You may have to decide how to react to something very quickly when you are involved in protecting someone. I can't say who we protect for obvious

reasons but it is a position that involves serious responsibility. Our department is also heavily involved with security at events such as Royal Ascot."

Thames Valley Police Tactical Firearms Unit has a mentoring scheme for officers who have completed three years service. Potential applicants are put in touch with a PC already on the department who will keep them updated and pass on ideas for development. The force has also run a number of women's firearms days in the past.

Sgt Coulson says: "The kinds of attributes you need to become a firearms officer include: confidence, perseverance, motivation and physical fitness. To be an Armed Response Officer you need to demonstrate a solid operational policing background. "Some people already on the department will be more helpful than others. Generally they are very encouraging on the teams but you will have to meet the standard. If it's what you really want to do then stick with it and do what you need to do to get on the department. If you ask for help people will normally give it to you."

Sgt Coulson is currently conducting a study on the level of female representation in tactical support departments. If you can help with any research, please email: phaedra.coulson@thamesvalley.pnn.police.uk

PC Elaine Michaels – dog handler

When you ask PC Elaine Michaels, a dog handler with Essex Police, why there are few women in specialist roles and what, if anything, could be putting them off, she says it's certainly not male colleagues – in fact, it is more likely to be dog mess.

“It's a ruffy tufty job and you can sometimes be handling a big snarling dog, which could be frightening to some people. It's very outdoors and very physical and you work in all weathers.

“You have to be a bit of a tomboy; half of my girly friends do not have a dog and wouldn't ever pick up dog poo. It may be seen as a macho job, although one woman on our section is a total lady and she always manages to remain pristine,” she says.

There are approximately 40 dog handlers in Essex Police and four of them are women and it is just one of the specialist roles where female officers are likely to be under-represented.

But when PC Michaels joined the dog section four years ago, she did find a difference between her own lifestyle and that of many of her male colleagues. She has three children and although her husband does flexi-time to fit in with them, when she started her career in the police she was a single mum and had a six year old and two year old to look after.

“It did make me laugh when I was on shift and some of the guys would say, ‘I'm looking forward to going home and having my dinner and a sit in the garden with a beer'. I would be going home and picking up the kids.”

PC Michaels managed to employ a nanny. She believes family commitments are an issue for some women but that tax credits can now help and if you are determined and can bring the experience you have already gained into the role, there is no reason not to go for it.

“You have to be a bit of a tomboy; half of my girly friends do not have a dog and wouldn't ever pick up dog poo...”

The officer, who has been with the force for 12 years, was clearly determined to carry out the role.

“I still have the school books from when I was 13 years old saying that I wanted to be a policewoman and a dog handler. But I wasn't even sure if they existed.”

She has used her experience as an officer in other areas of the force, including response and work on the domestic violence unit, to bolster her chances of being successful when she applied to the dog section.

“When you go into the dog section

they want to get an idea about the person going for the job. It's not just about dogs; you do need skills in different areas, like equality and diversity. I had to provide evidence of perseverance and I had also worked as a sexual offences team officer and dealt with victims of rape and sexual abuse.”

She used, as an example, a case where it took nine hours to interview an elderly lady who had been raped at knife-point in her own home. The victim kept skipping the part where the attack took place and PC Michaels had to guide her through that.

In terms of fitness levels, most specialist roles have their own fitness tests and can be carried out annually to ensure officers are physically fit enough to carry out the job.

“We do a fitness test every year and it hasn't been a problem for me so far.”

The job is very physical, aside from tracking offenders and containment, even going through training with her dog, a three-year-old German Shepherd Taz, can be exhausting work and dangerous – she has been shot at twice – but it's worth it, according to the officer.

The guys here have never ever treated me any differently because I'm female, I've had an extremely supportive trainer and that really helps.

“I hope, because I am a woman doing the job, it will show other women that they can do it too.”



Some women are put off by dogs and their ‘mess’