

FITTING THE BILL

Assistant Chief Constable Richard Stowe, the UK's ACPO CBRN, tells Gwyn Winfield what his new title will mean

GW: When we last spoke, six months ago, you were ACPO (Association of Chief Police Officers) TAM (Terrorist and Allied Matters). You have now changed to ACPO CBRN. What difference does the job title make to the person on the street and also to the police force?

RS: I am the national co-ordinator for police CBRN terrorism; I am still part of the ACPO TAM setup – that doesn't change – but it is now a full-time role as opposed to a standard ACPO part-time, policy role. This gives me the opportunity to take on the challenge of co-ordinating the activity of more than 50 police forces and the interface between the other blue light services, the military, etc, on a full-time basis. Trying to do this on a part time basis was an enormous undertaking that was taking up a great deal of my day-job time when I was a normal assistant chief constable; it is encouraging that it has been turned into a full-time role. In essence the job remains as it was, but I can deliver on a full-time basis.

GW: What was the genesis of this move? Had it been planned for a long time and only just came to fruition, or was this a response from ongoing work within the Police Operational Response Programme (PORP)? Which came first?

RS: It was a metamorphosis with a symbiotic relationship thrown in as well. It gradually developed as the scale of the work grew. It became obvious that the work load was unsustainable for someone to take on as a Chief Officer lead on a part time basis. The work load was too great and the scale of the operation required the attention of someone full-time.

GW: So – new into post, feet just under desk – what priorities and plans have you set yourself looking out to 3-5 years? What are the items that you really want to motor on?

RS: The delivery of the Police Operational response Plan has got to be the number one priority. We have an awful lot of work to do – marketing within the service and outside, and all the inter-agency issues with fire and ambulance have got to be talked through. There is a lot of dialogue and understanding as to how we are going to operate together at a CBRN incident still to do.

GW: It is difficult for you to start developing doctrine as it can affect both ends of the spectrum. At one end you have the areas where the threat is low and they have poor links with the other services and their border colleagues, and that is compared with London which is very well prepared and practised. Neither side is going to see the need to have doctrine imposed on them, and change their working

arrangements. You could end up with trouble at both ends...

RS: It is difficult, and there are certain forces that are more experienced and practised at CBRN matters. The experience of the London forces means they are well used to training with their fire and ambulance colleagues and used to going out on operations with them as we saw in Forest Gate and the investigation of Litvenenko. So the Metropolitan Police (Met) might be ahead of others in terms of experience, but my job is not just London focused; it is about delivering the same capability across the width of the UK. As an example, you can take the 7/7 bombs, which might have been delivered in London but which weren't built there; they came from elsewhere and travelled across the motorways and railways of the UK. It is ample evidence that this is a UK-wide problem, and we need to be able to deliver the quality of service that London has proved it can do elsewhere in the UK.

GW: When we last spoke you were just starting on the stocktake period, to bring all the forces up to the same level. You were also starting on the quick-don PPE, a crisis PA system, a survey vehicle and a cordon vehicle. How have they all developed?

RS: The notices have gone out for all those pieces of equipment and the procurement process is in hand. Full speed ahead as far as I see – all on plan and on track. They have a bidders conference for the PPE in early May.

GW: Those items are not the end of it though; there needs to be a wave of further procurement. The problem is that the threat is real and people will find solutions to solve it; they can't wait for doctrine and then procurement. You face a difficult decision: you don't want to curtail people's creativity but you also don't want a legacy of stand-alone systems that you need to somehow plug in...

RS: It is very challenging. We have a lot of creative cops out there who work with a range of chief constables who see things from different perspectives. My job is to pull that together to make sure we don't risk valuable resources and those resources we do use go into kit and equipment that is tested and approved for use by the police service. We are well on our way with that work. If you started CBRN from a blank sheet of paper you wouldn't start from here, but life isn't like that; the doctrine and tactics are vital as to how we are going to work together. It isn't possible for the tri-service relationships that we have to work, unless we have some kind of understanding between us of what our roles are and what we do when get there and how we do it. There are layers of complexity, whether it is dealing with people in wheelchairs, animals, property; all those things have to be written

down and agreed. Otherwise you will end up with a recipe for chaos – trying to decontaminate people without an idea of how it is going to work, for example.

GW: The response to the 7/7 London bombing was a testament to the skill of London and the regions' officers, and part of this has to be due to exercising together. Yet the Civil Contingencies Act stopped that and made it local. This means those large-scale exercises don't happen. How do we prepare for the large-scale, cross-border incidents when we don't practise them any more?

RS: I would disagree with that. I have officers from Devon and Cornwall working with me in London, as do many other forces. The co-operation between forces is better than it ever has been. The recent killing of prostitutes in Suffolk saw over 30 forces involved; interoperability is more familiar now and it is inevitable that wherever an incident happens it will have a cross-border aspect to it. So if you get something like 7/7, you get forces like West Yorkshire that were involved in that investigation; whatever happens will have a cross-border aspect to it. Should a CBRN attack occur no one police force will be able to deal with it all. Our plans are built on that basis and interoperability and mutual aid are key to the way that we do business

GW: Surely, then, the large-scale exercises are important? 7/7 worked partly because of this legacy of exercise. Without these you will be confronted with skills-fade, and the only time people get to practice this sort of interoperability is on operations.

RS: You are right to a point, but the police have had to face that before in murder investigations and all manner of things we do. We have to learn to manage skills, succession planning and skill fade as part of our day-to-day routine. We are used to it in other parts of the business, but we need to look at it again. There are a few people that know an awful lot about the CBRN business and over time they will move on and their skills will fade. We have to take the appropriate steps to make sure that doesn't happen. As has been said by politicians before, we are here for the long haul on this one, and the police force need to adapt accordingly.

GW: One thing that has happened recently is the Iraq chlorine attacks. How has this affected the UK? Is the UK response to chlorine more prepared than we would have been six months ago?

RS: We are always trying to improve and learn from incidents wherever they occur. There aren't, fortunately, many CBRN incidents, so we take our lessons from wherever we can find them internationally and see how it applies to the UK scenario.

GW: One thing that continues to worry me is the lack of civil CBRN C4i – the plume modelling, downwind analysis, etc. There is a shortage of real-time information for all levels of the command chain, the UK civil forces have yet to get to grips with warning and reporting, and it needs greater priority.

RS: As the Police Operational Response Plan delivers over the next three years these will be the areas we look at. You are talking about basic and fundamental issues when dealing with a CBRN incident – what it is and where it is. A key role of the emergency services is doing that...



GW: But the trouble is that Porton Down has been the stop-gap, but they cannot provide you with the real-time information you need. Equally, the military process is to slap an ATP45 triangle on it, but this is not suitable for evacuation, decon and cordon, etc. You don't have the officers for that. So where in the priority list is it?

RS: The detection, identification and monitoring of any CBRN incident is absolutely vital, and the police service has a big part to play – we don't know where the hot zone is and where we can decon until we have established where the hot zone lies; it is a fundamental part of what we do. I'll leave it

there – it is integral to what we do; it is challenging, but integral.

GW: The Fire Service have improved their detection, identification and monitoring (DIM). Has this affected doctrine? Is it the case that you can hand off some detection work – bio for example – to them?

RS: Any job that we do has to be worked on with our partners; there is no point in trying to do this alone. We have to remember who has responsibility for what in a CBRN environment. For example, once the living have been rescued, the fire service won't want to hang around for days after investigating the forensics – that is the police role. Equally, once the living have gone, the ambulance service have no role except protecting the protectors; it is getting the clarity of 'who does what, when' right that is the important part of the doctrine. Ambulance and Fire are quite straightforward as they have frames of reference; for us this is a crime scene – primarily that's why we are involved – so we have all the parts of managing the scene, the people, property and animals etc.

GW: But is biological detection a priority or could you hand it over to the fire service? It takes up a great deal of resource and all you need is to do a test with Hazmat ID to confirm it is bio and take a sample – the level above is someone else's concern...

RS: New Dimensions has taken the fire service to a place where they have a capability they haven't had before. In essence, the fire service has always had a great deal of experience of the hazmat environment, and a lot of the equipment they have is of as much use in a hazmat environment as a CBRN one. The difference is that one involves a criminal act, and a CBRN incident is a crime scene and needs to be investigated by the police. It makes no difference whether it is biological or radiation; it has to be investigated by police and we will always have a role there. We cannot hand that over to someone else. We investigate crime.

GW: Yet London Fire Brigade, for example, have done their courses to allow samples that they take to be admissible in a court of law. Isn't that the way forward – to get a 'silver' confirmation, send off the sample to the lab and get on with the rest of the forensics?

RS: From the police perspective we are looking at two sides. First, is it dangerous? If it is dangerous, that requires a certain form

of behaviour. Second, you have to investigate it, and that requires a different, highly specialised set of skills – forensic science. The forensic side has a lot of work to be done and a lot of opportunities. The police service have to deliver forensics to the same standard in a CBRN environment as they would in a conventional explosive: and we have proved over the years how complicated that is. Identifying whether it is bio or chem at the scene is something that all services will want to get on to, as you want to agree what you are dealing with. What compound, what chemicals and where they came from – that is the forensic side and would come under the police.

GW: Currently you have the Guardian assay reader and QTL and Alexeter devices agreed by the Home Office. Is that the limit, or do you want a gold level above that?

RS: The world of equipment is so fast moving, whether it is in DIM, PPE or some of the escape hoods. It is quite fascinating compared to where we started. Personal protective equipment and DIM will continue to be looked

at it, as it can almost drive tactics and doctrine. Where we are now is somewhere where we won't be in ten years time. You know, as I do, that charcoal has protected us for the best part of the century and now we are moving out of charcoal into other forms of PPE. It will be the same with DIM equipment; I am not going to say 'This is what we will do, because this is what equipment allows us to do,' as we need to be flexible.

GW: Taking the names out of the way, would you rather see an improved layer of capability above the one that you already have? Or is that box ticked and you are satisfied?

RS: I don't think I am ever satisfied. The Holy Grail of the man-portable DIM box that can do all three (chem,bio,rad) is still what we are working towards and I think one day we will find it. Hazmat ID is a fantastic piece of kit considering how old it is, and I am sure it will be improved on. There are a number of bio pieces of work that still have a long way to go but even in rad, an alpha particle detector that can detect a source from 40ft would come in very handy, but is unlikely that it is

ever going to happen – there are some enormous challenges.

GW: So moving from the future to the present, what are your immediate aims?

RS: Quick-donning PPE and how that develops will interest me a great deal. With quick-donning PPE you are talking about speed of putting it on, operability – how long can you operate in it – and what level of protection it delivers; I will be very interested to see what industry can deliver. We are on the verge of some exciting developments in that side of the house for the civil responder, and it is about getting an officer from standard police uniform to CBRN capability in a couple of minutes – it is an exciting concept. The speed at which they can enter the hot zone and protect the public will be key to saving lives. Even if you take a fire fighter – how quickly can he get into his full gas-tight and SCBA? There is always going to be a time lag, and it is how much you can reduce that, how quickly we can deploy forward, that will determine how many lives we can save.



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