A PROFESSOR'S "STREET LESSONS"

By Dr. GEORGE L. KIRKHAM
Assistant Professor
School of Criminology, Florida State University,
Tallahassee, Fla, U.S. of A.

As policemen we have come under increasing criticism by various individuals and groups in our society in recent years, I cannot help but wonder how many times they have clenched their teeth and wished they could expose their critics to only a few of the harsh realities which their job involves.

Persons such as myself, members of the academic community, have traditionally been quick to find fault with the police. From isolated incidents reported in the various new media, we have fashioned for ourselves a stereotyped image of the police officer which conveniently confirms to our notions of what he is. We see the brutal cop, the racist cop, the grafting cop, the discourteous cop. What we do not see, however is the image of thousands of dedicated men and women struggling against almost impossible odds to preserve our society and everything in it which we cherish.

For some years, first as a student and later as a professor of criminology, I found myself troubled by the fact that most of us who write books and articles on the police have never been policemen ourselves. I began to be bothered increasingly by many of my students who were former policemen. Time and again they would respond to my frequently critical lectures on the police with the argument that I could not possibly understand what a police officer has to endure in modern society until I had been one myself. Under the weight of this frustration, and my personal conviction that knowledge has an applied as well as a theoretical dimension, I decided to take up this challenge. I would become a policeman myself as a means of establishing once and for all the accuracy of what I and other criminologists had been saying about the police for so long.

FROM PROFESSOR TO COP:

Suffice it so say that my announced intention to become a uniformed patrolman was at first met with fairly widespread disbelief on the part of family, friends, and colleagues alike. At 31, with a family and an established career as a criminologist, I was surely an unlikely candidate for the position of police recruit. The very idea, it was suggested to me, was outrageous and absurd. I was told that no police administrator in his right mind would allow a representative of the academic world to enter his organization. It had never been done and could not be done.

Fortunately, many of my students, who either had been policemen or were at the time, sounded a far more optimistic and enthusiastic note. Police administrators and officers alike, they said, would welcome the opportunity to expose members of the academic community to the problems of their occupation. If one of us were really willing to see and feel the policeman's world from behind a badge and blue uniform, instead of from the safe and comfortable vantage point of a classroom or university office, police officers themselves would do everything in their power to make the opportunity available. Despite these assurances from my policemen-students, I remained skeptical over my chances of being allowed to do such an unorthodox thing.

This skepticism was, however, soon to be overcome. One of my better criminology students at the time was a young police officer on educational leave from Jacksonville, Fla., Sheriff's Office. Upon learning of my desire to become a police officer in order to better understand the problems of policemen, he urged me to contact Sheriff Dale Carson and Under-sheriff D. K. Brown of his department with my proposal. I had earlier heard other police officers describe the consolidated 800-man force of Jacksonville-Duval County as one of the most progressive departments in the country. I learned that Sheriff Carson and Under Sheriff Brown, two former FBI Agents, had won considerable respect in the law enforcement profession as enlightened and innovative administrators.

The size and composition of Jacksonville as well as its nearness to my university and home, made it appear to be an ideal location for what I wished to do. Numbering just over one-half million residents, Jacksonville impressed me as being the kind of large and rapidly growing American city which inevitably experiences the major social problems of our time: crime and delinquency, racial unrest, poverty, and mental illness. A seaport and industrial centre, Jacksonville offered a diversity of urban, suburban, and even rural populations in its vast land area. I took particular note of the fact that it contained a fairly typical inner-city slum section and black ghetto, both of which were in the process of being transformed through a massive program of urban redevelopment. This latter feature was especially important to me insofar as I wanted to personally experience the stresses and strains of today's city policeman. It was, after all, he who had traditionally been the subject of such intense interest and criticism on the part of social scientists such as myself.

Much to my surprise, both Sheriff Carson and Under-sheriff Brown were not only supportive but enthusiastic as well over my proposal to become a city patrolman. I made it clear to them at the outset that I did not wish to function as an observer or reserve officer, but rather wanted to become a fully sworn and full time member of their department for a period of between 4 and 6 months. I further stated that I hoped to spend most of this period working as a uniformed patrolman in those inner city beats most characterized by violence, poverty, social unrest, and high crime rates. They agreed to this, with the understanding that I would first have to meet the same requirements as any other police candidate, I would, for example have to submit to a thorough character investigation, a physical examination, and would have to meet the same training standards applied to all other Florida police officers. Since I was to be unpaid, I would be exempted from departmental civil service requirements.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *We Thank Dr. G. L. Kirkham for his most recent kind personal authority to reproduce the following article which originally was published within "The Probation Officer" (the official Bulletin of the Probation Officers' Association of Victoria), September, 1977.*

Dr. Kirkham's article, to totally coin his own turn of phrase and for which we make no apology, "leaves one with the humbling realisation that possession of a Ph.D. does not give a man a corner on knowledge — or place him in a position where he cannot take lessons from those less educated than himself".

RESTYLING AN IMAGE:

Both Carson and Brown set about overcoming various administrative and insurance problems which had to be dealt with in advance of my becoming a police officer. Suppose for example, I should be injured or killed in the line of duty, or should injure or kill someone else. What of and department and city's liability? These and other issues were gradually resolved with considerable effort on their part. The only stipulation set forth by both administrators was one with which I strongly agreed: for the sake of morale and confidence in the department, every officer must know in advance exactly who I was and what I was doing. Other than being in the unusual position of a "patrolman-professor", I would be indistinguishable from other officers in every respect, from the standard issue .38 Smith and Wesson revolver I would carry to the badge and uniform I would wear.

The biggest and final obstacle which I faced was the necessity that I comply fully with a 1967 Florida Police Standards law, which requires that every police officer and deputy sheriff in the State complete a minimum of 280 hours of law enforcement training prior to being sworn in and assigned to regular duty. Since I had a full time university job nearly 200 miles from Jacksonville, this meant that I would be unable to attend the regular sheriff's academy. I would have to attend a certified academy in my own area, something which I arranged to do with Sheriff Carson's sponsorship.

For 4 months, 4 hours each evening and 5 nights a week, I attended the Tallahassee area police academy, along with 35 younger classmates. As a balding intellectual, I at first stood out as an oddity in the class of young men destined to become local law enforcement officers. With the passage of time however, they came to accept me and I them. We joked, drank coffee, and struggled through various examinations and lessons together. At first known only as "the professor" the men later nicknamed me "Doc" over my good natured protests.

As the days stretched into weeks and the weeks into months, I took lengthy notes on the interviewing of witnesses at crime scenes, investigated imaginary traffic accidents, and lifted fingerprints. Some nights I went home after hours of physical defence training with my uniformly younger and stronger peers with tired muscles, bruises and the feeling that I should have my head examined for undertaking such a rugged project.

As someone who had never lifted a handgun, I quickly grew accustomed to the nose of .35 revolvers firing at the cardboard silhouettes which our minds transformed into real assailants at the sound of the range whistle. I learned how to properly make car stops, approach a front door or darkened building, question suspects, and a thousand other things that every modern police officer must know. After what seemed an eternity, graduation from the academy finally came, and with it what was to become the most difficult but rewarding educational experience of my life: I became a policeman.

THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS:

I will never forget standing in front of the Jacksonville police station on that first day. I felt incredibly awkward and conspicuous in the new blue uniform and creaking leather. Whatever confidence in my ability to "do the job" I had gained during the academy seemed to evaporate as I stood there watching the other blue figures hurrying in the evening rain towards assembly. After some minutes, I summoned the courage to walk into the station and into my new career as a core city patrolman.

That first day seems long ago now. As I write this, I have completed over 100 tours of duty as a patrolman. Although still a rookie officer, so much has happened in the short space of 6 months that I will never again be either the same man or the same scientist who stood in front of the station on that first day. While it is hard to even begin to describe within a brief article the many changes which have occurred within me during this time, I would like to share with fellow policemen and colleagues in the academic community a few of what I regard as the more important of what I will call my "street lessons".

I had always personally been of the opinion that police officers greatly exaggerate the amount of verbal disrespect and physical abuse to which they are subjected in the line of duty. During my first few hours as a street officer, I lived blissfully in a magic bubble which was soon to burst. As a college professor, I had grown accustomed to being treated with uniform respect and deference by those I encountered. I somehow naively assumed that this same quality of respect would carry over in my new role as a policeman. I was after all, a representative of the law, identifiable to all by the badge and uniform I wore as someone dedicated to the protection of society. Surely that fact would entitle me to a measure of respect and co-operation — or so I thought. I quickly found that my badge and uniform, rather than serving to shield me from such things as disrespect and violence, only acted as a magnet which drew me toward many individuals who hated all that I represented.

I had discounted on my first evening the warning of a veteran sergeant who, after hearing that I was about to begin work as a patrolman shook his head and cautioned, "You'd better watch yourself out there, Professor, it gets pretty rough sometimes!" I was soon to find out what he meant.

Several hours into my first evening on the streets, my partner and I were dispatched to a bar in the downtown area to handle a disturbance complaint. Inside we encountered a large and boisterous drunk who was arguing with the bartender and loudly refusing to leave. As someone with considerable experience as a correctional counsellor and mental health worker, I hastened to take charge of the situation. "Excuse me, Sir," I smiled pleasantly at the drunk, "but I wonder if I could ask you to step outside and talk with me for just a minute?" The man stared at me through bloodshot eyes in disbelief for a second, raising one hand to scratch the stubble of several days growth of beard. Then suddenly, without warning it happened. He swung at me, luckily missing my face and striking me on the right shoulder. I couldn't believe it. What on earth had I done to provoke such a reaction? Before I could recover from my startled condition, he swung again — this time tearing my whistle chain from my shoulder epaulet. After a brief struggle, we had the still shouting cursing man locked in the back of our cruiser, I stood there breathing heavily with my hair in my eyes as I surveyed the damage to my new uniform and looked in bewilderment at my partner, who only smiled and clapped me affectionately on the back.

THEORY v. PRACTICE:

"Something is very wrong" I remember thinking to myself in the front seat as we headed for the jail. I had used the same kind of gentle, rapport-building approach with countless offenders in prison and probation settings. It had always worked so well there. What was so different about being a policeman? In the days and weeks that followed, I was to learn the answer to this question, the hard way. As a university professor, I had always sought to convey to students the idea that it is a mistake to exercise authority, to make decisions for other people, or rely upon others and commands to accomplish something. As a police officer myself, I was forced time and again to do just that. For the first time in my life, I encountered individuals who interpreted kindess as weakness, as an invitation to disrespect or violence. I encountered men, women and children who, in fear, desperation, or excitement, looked to the person behind

my blue uniform and shield for guidance, control and direction. As someone who had always condemned the exercise of authority, the acceptance of myself as an unavoidable symbol of authority came as a bitter lesson.

I found that there was a world of difference between encountering individuals, as I had, in mental health or correctional settings, and facing them as the patrolman must; when they are violent, hysterical, desperate, when I put the uniform of a police officer on, I lost the luxury of sitting in an air-conditioned office with my pipe and books, calmly discussing with a rapist or armed robber the past problems which had led him into trouble with the law. Such offenders had seemed so innocent, so harmless in the sterile setting of the prison. The often terrible crimes which they had committed were long since past, reduced like their victims to so many printed words on a page.

Now, as a police officer, I began to encounter the offender for the first time as a real menace to my personal safety and the security of our society. The felon was no longer a harmless figure sitting in blue denims across my prison desk, a "victim" of society to be treated with compassion and leniency. He became an armed robber fleeing from the scene of the crime, a crazed maniac threatening his family with a gun, someone who may become my killer crouched behind the wheel of a car on a dark street.

LESSON IN FEAR:

Like crime itself, fear quickly ceased to be an impersonal and abstract thing. It became something which I regularly experienced. It was a tightness in my stomach as I approached a warehouse where something had tripped a silent alarm. I would taste it as a dryness in my mouth as we raced with blue lights and siren toward the site of a "Signal Zero" (armed and dangerous) call. For the first time in my life, I came to know — as every policeman knows — the true meaning of fear. Through shift after shift it stalked me, making my palms cold and sweaty, and pushing the adrenalin through my veins.

I recall particularly a dramatic lesson in the meaning of fear which took place shortly after I joined the force. My partner and I were on routine patrol one Saturday evening in a deteriorated area of cheap bars and pool halls when we observed a young male double-parked in the middle of the street. I pulled along side and asked him in a civil manner to either park or drive on, whereupon he began loudly cursing us and shouting that we couldn't make him go anywhere. An angry crowd began to gather as we got out of our patrol car and approached the man, who was by this time shouting and calling to bystanders for assistance. As a criminology professor, some months earlier I would have urged that the police officer who was now myself simply leave the car double-parked and move on rather than risk an incident. As a policeman, however, I had come to realise that an officer can never back down from his responsibility to enforce the law. Whatever the risk to himself, every police officer understands that his ability to back up the lawful authority which he represents is the only thing which stands between civilization and the jungle of lawlessness.

The man continued to curse us and adamantly refused to move his car. As we placed him under arrest and attempted to move him to our cruiser, an unidentified male and female rushed from the crowd which was steadily enlarging and sought to free him. In the ensuing struggle, a hysterical female unsnapped and tried to grab my service revolver, and the now angry mob began to converge on us. Suddenly, I was no longer an "ivory-tower" scholar watching typical police "overreaction" to a street incident — but I was part of it and fighting to remain alive and uninjured. I remember the sickening sensation of cold terror which filled my insides as I struggled to reach our car radio. I simultaneously put out a distress call and pressed the hidden electric release button on our shotgun rack as my partner sought to maintain his grip on the prisoner and hold the crowd at bay with his revolver.

How hashly I would have judged the officer who now grabbed the shotgun only a few months before. I rounded the rear of our cruiser with the weapon and shouted at the mob to move back. The memory flashed through my mind that I had always argued that policemen should not be allowed to carry shotguns because of their "offensive" character and the potential damage to community relations as a result of their display. How readily as a criminology professor I would have condemned the officer who was now myself, trembling with fear and anxiety and menacing an "unarmed" assembly with an "offensive" weapon. But circumstances had dramatically changed my perspective, for now it was **my** life and safety that were in danger, **my** wife and child who might be mourning. Not a "policeman" or Patrolman Smith but **me,** George Kirkham! I felt accordingly bitter when I saw the individual who had provoked this near riot back on the streets the next night, laughing as though our charge of "resisting arrest with violence" was a big joke. Like my partner, I found myself feeling angry and frustrated shortly afterward when this same individual was allowed to plead guilty to a reduced charge of "breach of peace".

LOUD DEFENDANTS AND SILENT VICTIMS:

As someone who has been greatly concerned about the rights of offenders, I now began to consider for the first time the rights of the police officers. As a police officer, I felt that my efforts to protect society and maintain my personal safety were menaced by many of the very court decisions and lenient parole board actions I had always been eager to defend. An educated man, I could not answer the questions of my fellow officers as to why those who kill and maim policemen, men who are involved in no less honourable activity than holding our society together, should be so often subjected to minor penalties. I grew weary of carefully following difficult legal restrictions, while thugs and hoodlums consistently twisted the law to their own advantage. I remember standing in the street one evening and reading a heroin "pusher" his rights only to have him convulse with laughter halfway through and finish reciting them, word for word, from memory. He had been given his "rights" under the law, but what about the rights of those who were the victims of people like himself? For the first time questions such as these began to bother me.

As a corrections worker and someone raised in a comfortable middle class home, I had always been insulated from the kind of human misery and tragedy which became part of the policeman's everyday life. Now, the often terrible sights, sounds and smells of my job began to haunt me hours after I had taken the blue uniform and badge off. Some nights I would lie in bed unable to sleep, trying desperately to forget the things I had seen during a particular tour of duty: the rat infested shacks that served for homes to those far less fortunate than I, a teenage boy dying in my arms after being struck by a car, small children clad in rags with stomachs bloated from hunger playing in a urine splattered hall, the victim of a robbery senselessly beaten and murdered.

In my new role as a police officer, I found that the victims of crime ceased to be impersonal statistics. As corrections worker and criminology professor, I had never given much thought to those who are victimized by criminals in our society. Now the sight of so many lives ruthlessly damaged and destroyed by the perpetrators of crime left me preoccupied with the question of society's responsibility to protect the men, women and children who are victimized daily.

For all the tragic victims of crime I have seen during the past 6 months, one case stands out above all. There was an elderly man who lived with his dog in my apartment building down town. He was a retired bus driver and his wife was long deceased. As time went by, I became friends with the old man and his dog. I could usually count on finding both of them standing on the corner on my way to work. I would engage in casual conversation with the old man, and sometimes he and his dog would walk several blocks toward the station with me. They were both as predictable as a clock; each evening around 7, the old man would walk to the same smal restaurant several blocks away, where he would eat his evening meal while the dog waited dutifully outside.

One evening my partner and I were called to a street shooting near my apartment building. My heart sank as we pulled up and I saw the old man's mutt in a crowd of people gathered on the sidewalk. The old man was lying on his back, in a large pool of blood, half trying to brace himself on an elbow. He clutched a bullet wound in his chest and gasped to me that three young men had stopped him and demanded his money. After taking his wallet and seeing how little he had, they shot him and left him on the street. As a police officer, I was enraged time and again at the cruelty and senselessness of acts such as this, at the arrogance of brazen thugs who prey with impunity on innocent citizens.

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE:

The same kinds of daily stresses which affected my fellow officers soon began to take their toll on me, I became sick and tired of being reviled and attacked by criminals who could usually find a most sympathetic audience in judges and jurors eager to understand their side of things and provide them with "another chance". I grew tired of living under the axe of news media and community pressure groups eager to seize upon the slightest mistake by myself or a fellow police officer.

As a criminology professor, I had always enjoyed the luxury of having great amounts of time in which to make difficult decisions. As a police officer, however, I found myself forced to make the most critical choices in a time frame of seconds, rather than days; to shoot or not to shoot, to arrest or not to arrest, to give chase or let go always with the nagging certainty that others, those with great amounts of time in which to analyze and think, stood ready to judge and condemn me for whatever action I might take or fail to take. I found myself not only forced to live a life consisting of seconds and adrenalin, but forced to deal with human problems which were infinitely more difficult than anything I had ever confronted in a correctional or mental health setting. Family fights, mental illness, potentially explosive crowd situations, dangerous individuals — I found myself progressively awed by the complexity of tasks faced by men whose work I once thought was fairly simple and straightforward.

Indeed, I would like to take the average clinical psychologist or psychiatrist and invite him to function for just a day in the world of the policeman, to confront people whose problems are both serious and in need of immediate solution. I would invite him to walk, as I have, into a smoke-filled pool room where five or six angry men are swinging cues at one another. I would like the prison counsellor and parole officer to see their client Jones — not calm and composed in an office setting, but as the street cop sees him — beating his small child with a heavy belt buckle, or kicking his pregnant wife. I wish that they, and every judge and juror in our country could see the ravages of crime as the cop on the beat must: innocent people cut, shot, beaten, raped, robbed, murdered. It would, I feel certain, give them a different perspective on crime and criminals, just as it has me.

HUMANENESS IN UNIFORM:

For all the human misery and suffering which police officers must witness in their work, I found myself amazed at the incredible humanity and compassion which seems to characterize most of them. My own stereotypes of the brutal, sadistic cop were time and again shattered by the sight of humanitarian kindness on the part of the thin blue line: a young patrolman giving mouth to mouth resuscitation to a filthy derelict; a grizzled old veteran embarrassed when I discovered the bags of jelly beans which he carried in the trunk of his car for impoverished ghetto kids — to whom he was the closest thing to an Easter Bunny they would ever know: an officer giving money out of his own pocket to a hungry and stranded family he would probably never see again; and another patrolman taking the trouble to drop by on his own time in order to give worried parents information about their problem son or daughter.

As a police officer, I found myself repeatedly surprised at the ability of my fellow patrolmen to withstand the often enormous daily pressure of their work. Long hours, frustration, danger, anxiety — all seemed to be taken in strides as just part of the reality of being a cop. I went eventually through the humbling discovery that I, like the men in blue with whom I worked, was simply a human being with definite limits to the amount of stress I could endure in a given period of time.

As a police officer myself, I found that society demands too much of its policemen: not only are they expected to enforce the law, but to be curbside psychiatrists, marriage counsellors, social workers, and even ministers and doctors. I found that a good street officer combines in his daily work spiinters of each of these complex professions and many more. Certainly it is unreasonable for us to ask so much of these men in blue; yet we must, for there is simply no one else to whom we can turn for help on the kind of crisis and problems policemen deal with. No one else wants to counsel a family with problems at 3 am on Sunday; no one else wants to enter a darkened building after a burglary; no one else wants to confront a robber or madman with a gun. No one else wants to stare poverty, mental illness, and human tragedy in the face day after day, to pick up the pieces of shattered lives.

As a policeman myself, I have often asked myself the questions: "Why does a man become a cop?" "What makes him stay with it? Surely it's not the disrespect, the legal restrictions which make the job increasingly rough, the long hours and low pay, or the risk of being killed or injured trying to protect people who often don't seem to care.

The only answer to this question I have been able to arrive at is one based on my own limited experience as a policeman. Night after night, I came home and took off the badge and blue uniform with a sense of satisfaction and contribution to society that I have never known in any other job. Somehow that feeling seemed to make everything — the disrespect, the danger, the boredom — worthwhile.

I recall in particular one evening when this point was dramatized to me. It had been a long, hard shift — one which ended with a high-speed chase of a stolen car in which we narrowly escaped injury when another vehicle pulled in front of our patrol car. As we checked off duty, I was vaguely aware of being tired and tense. My partner and I were headed for a restaurant and a bite of breakfast when we both heard the unmistakable sound of breaking glass coming from a church and spotted two long-haired teenage boys running from the area. We confronted them and I asked one for identification, displaying my own identification. He sneered at me, cursed, and turned to walk away. The next thing I knew I had grabbed the youth by his shirt and spun him around shouting, "I'm talking to you, punk!" I felt my partner's arm on my shoulder

and heard his reassuring voice behind me, "Take it easy, Doc!" I released my grip on the adolescent and stood silently for several seconds, unable to accept the inescapable reality that I had lost my "cool". My mind flashed back to a lecture during which I had told my students, "Any man who is not able to maintain absolute control of his emotions at all times has no business being a police officer." I was at the time of this incident director of a human relations project designed to teach policemen "emotional control" skills. Now here I was, an "emotional control" expert, being told to calm down by a policeman!

A COMPLEX CHALLENGE:

As someone who has also regarded policemen as a "paranoid" lot, I discovered in the daily round of violence which became part of my life that chronic suspiciousness is something that a good cop cultivates in the interest of going home to his family each evening. Like so many other officers, my daily exposure to street crime soon had me carrying an off-duty weapon virtually everywhere I went. I began to become watchful of who and what was around me, as things began to acquire a new meaning: an open door, someone loitering on a dark corner, a rear licence plate covered with dirt. My personality began to change slowly according to my family, friends, and colleagues as my career as a policeman progressed. Once quick to drop critical barbs about policemen to intellectual friends, I now became extremely sensitive about such remarks — and several times became engaged in heated arguments over them.

AN INVALUABLE EDUCATION:

For too long now, we in America's colleges and universities have conveyed to young men and women the subtle message that there is something wrong with "being a cop". It's time for that to stop. This point was forcibly brought home to me one evening not long ago. I had just completed a day shift and had to rush back to the university with no chance to change out of uniform for a late afternoon class. As I rushed into my office to pick up my lecture notes, my secretary's jaw dropped at the sight of the uniform. "Why Dr. Kirkham, you're not going to class looking like **that** are you?" I felt momentarily embarrassed, and then struck by the realization that I would not feel the need to apologize if I appeared before my students with long hair or a beard. Free love advocates and hatemonger revoluntionaries do not apologise for their group memberships, so why should someone whose appearance symbolizes a commitment to serve and protect society? "Why not," I replied with a slight smile, "I'm proud to be a cop!" I picked up my notes and went on to class.

Let me conclude this article by saying that I would hope that other educators might take the trouble to observe firsthand some of the policeman's problems before being so quick to condemn and pass judgment on the thin blue line. We are all familiar with the old expression which urges us to refrain from judging the worth of another man's actions until we have walked at least a mile in his shoes. To be sure, I have not walked that mile as a rookie patrolman with barely 6 months' experience. But I have at least tried the shoes on and taken a few difficult steps in them. Those few steps have given me a profoundly new understanding and appreciation of our police, and have left me with the humbling realization that possession of a Ph.D. does not give a man a corner on knowledge, or place him in the lofty position where he cannot take lessons from those less educated than himself.