

Special Report

SPECIAL BRANCH

23 day of August 1977

SUBJECT

De-briefing -
Lewisham 13th
August 1977.

Reference to Papers

346/77/14

Noted
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13/4/81

1. A de-briefing of the eighteen Special Branch officers on duty in Lewisham on 13 August 1977 was held in Special Branch under the chairmanship of Superintendent [redacted]. Personal accounts and views of these officers on all aspects of the day's events were discussed at length and the following analysis of the material obtained attempts to define the tactics of demonstrators and to examine the effectiveness of police action to neutralise them.

2. Any concise analysis of the situation must assume in the reader a general grasp of the background to the National Front march; the basically laudable intentions of the earlier All Lewisham Campaign Against Racism and Fascism counter-demonstration, and the more sinister motives behind the activities organised by the ultra left - the Socialist Workers Party, on that day.

3. Briefly the events of the day can be summarised as follows:

i) The ALCARAF counter march

This was a peaceful march involving some 5,000 demonstrators, who assembled at Ladywell Recreation Ground and were allowed to march over part of the route originally intended to be covered by the NF later in the day. This demonstration dispersed at a police cordon at Loampit Hill an hour before assembly of the NF.

ii) The NF march

This march had become symbolic during the weeks before the 13th. It had to take place and take place it did, albeit with the protection of uniform police. Its final route was changed by police as pre-arranged at the very last minute and was shorter than either the NF or the left-wing expected. However, having started punctually at 3 pm from Achilles Street the march arrived at Cressingham Road without mishap at 3.55 pm where shortly afterwards, the participants dispersed.

iii) The counter demonstration

The declared object was to prevent the NF march either forming up or reaching its destination. In this it failed because of the outstanding bravery and dedication of several thousand uniform police officers. But more poignant is the fact that the counter demonstration was no doubt pitched at the far more odious level of yet another direct confrontation with police, organised beforehand and manipulated on the day, by groups of SWP supporters.

iv) Hooliganism

Lewisham cannot be said to be immune from this social impediment and of course the arrest of the Lewisham 21 was the catalyst for several recent political demonstrations. On 13 August there is no doubt that a large number of coloured hooligans were enjoying the chance to indulge themselves, not only under the umbrella of political agitation but elsewhere, in the anticipation that areas in Lewisham and New Cross would probably be unpoliced.

4. The supporters of the SWP must be given grudging credit for doing their homework. Earlier they had taken over a commune overlooking the NF rallying point only to be removed by police the day before. Their communication on the day was passable and had been backed up by a group of motor cyclists who darted back and forth during the morning gathering intelligence on the developing situation. There is no doubt that where possible demonstrators were listening intently to personal radios carried by senior police officers. Their weapons were brought to the scene in carrier bags and rucksacks or in vans; staves were flimsily disguised as flags.

5. Trotskyist support of the ALCARAF march was to be expected and it was estimated that some 800 - 1,000 supporters of this faction took part that morning. During the forming up in Ladywell Recreation Ground the SWP distributed their inevitable leaflets, but with a difference: the reverse of the broadsheet contained a good map of the whole area. These maps were to prove useful to the demonstrators during the day and there is no doubt that some police manoeuvres were circumnavigated by a knowledge of the locale.

6. The decision of the leaders of the ALCARAF march to disperse in Loampit Hill was clearly a surprise. The police cordon was soon withdrawn and the remaining participants of the march made their way as instructed by stewards to Clifton Rise.

7. Uniform police were basically deployed in large numbers to the north of New Cross Road. This left the south side of this road virtually under the control of trotskyists. A great number of missiles were hurled at police and these were passed forward over the heads of demonstrators to reach the throwers who dispensed them as the mob raised their fists in marxist salutes.

8. When the NF march set off, counter demonstrators in New Cross Road were controlled with some difficulty and another police cordon attempted to stop demonstrators moving into Lewisham Way. It is clear from accounts of Special Branch officers in the demonstration that if the latter police cordon was intended to stop the demonstrators moving south or to divert them to the west, then it failed. With their maps, it was a simple matter for the demonstrators to by-pass police through one of the side roads into Lewisham Way and on into the virtually unpoliced area further south.

9. The mob had by this time attracted a great number of black hooligans who jauntily strolled along Lewisham Way openly brandishing weapons and missiles in their hats and scarves. On one occasion a group of about 40 black youths set about a lone uniformed officer in Loampit Vale kicking him to the ground. When two police motor-cyclists came to his aid, the group strolled away laughing. No one had been arrested.

10. By 3.30 pm the north end of Lewisham High Street had become completely blocked by a buildup of demonstrators hoping to waylay the NF march if it proceeded south. This had occurred over the preceeding 1½ hours and was unhampered by police presence. Persons were seen bringing in bricks from a nearby demolition site in supermarket trolleys and a number of left-wing thugs, with the clear intention of causing violence, had arrived with helmets, goggles, plastic bottles and staves.

11. A large bulk of timber and other barriers had been pulled by the demonstrators at the Clock Tower across Lee Bridge and Lewisham High Street and by 4 pm the whole area was saturated by demonstrators. A police cordon across Lewisham Road forced the demonstrators back on themselves and police reinforcements arriving in coaches, presumably

from the vicinity of Clifton Rise were stopped by demonstrators, their windows smashed and in one instance the civilian driver partially pulled from his seat in fear of his life. Both police and hire coaches suffered this affront and were obliged to retire to Loampit Vale. The demonstrators now fired their full venom upon police and kept up the largest barrage of missiles so far. The front ranks of demonstrators would press against police, then at a command, withdraw quickly as a hail of missiles was dispensed onto the police. Most missiles were thrown by blacks, and their enthusiasm soon caused many missiles intended for police to land upon the front line demonstrators and those across the road. The barricades were moved by police and after the many showers of bricks and debris of the day, police were at last to take shelter behind their new plastic shields.

12. The production of these protective shields had a most striking effect upon the demonstrators. The immediate shock caused them to recoil and retreat, thus giving the police the undoubted upper hand.

13. The effect of the police with riot shields unfortunately channelled demonstrators along Lewisham High Street, and their retreat soon became an attack upon Lewisham Police Station. It was the final sacrificial burning by the demonstrators of the motor cycle which seemed to calm things down, and in no time the streets were empty.

14. In all the events of the day placed a great strain on police manpower and patience.

15. If lessons are to be learned, then we should, perhaps, look at the feasibility of either preventing the large build-up of demonstrators who eventually take control of large areas, as for example in New Cross Road and Lewisham High Street; or placing police detachments where demonstrators can be prevented from using their missile throwing tactics.

16. A large number of police were required to ensure the safety of the NF march, yet elsewhere groups of youths were openly flouting the law to the possible terror of the public. It may be that police reserves should be employed in patrolling other streets to prevent this.

17. The helicopter has a unique ability for surveillance and the transmission of intelligence. When used in a similar situation, it is imperative that communications are good and transmitted efficiently to the operations room.

18. The use of the protective shields had a remarkable effect in colling the demonstrators, a fact referred to many times by our officers at the receiving end. But the psychological value next time will have diminished, as will their usefulness when demonstrators devise tactics to counteract them - the simple combination of rain and flour bombs will certainly reduce their usefulness.

19. Tactically, this may be the time for a more positive approach by police to mob violence. Protective shields were seen as an aggressive gesture and the effect was striking and whilst we should not be seen as the aggressor, there is a case for the systematic arrest of the active organisers at an early stage, and perhaps for meeting violence with violence, or the expectation of it.

20. In conclusion it can be said that hitherto such violent demonstrations have taken place in comparatively confined situations and in localities where the local population is neither sympathetic to demonstrators nor antipathetic to police. Cognisance must be taken of these two important points so that police resources are not concentrated on a march or meeting to the detriment of areas nearby. Such areas should be as fully policed as possible as an integral part of the police plans for the demonstration.



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Detective Sergeant

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1. This analysis has pinpointed valuable information on newly observed tactics employed by the violent Trotskyist element and is a challenge to police to adapt their own tactics to effectively counter them.

2. One important facet, in my view, is that of tactical intelligence on the day. Serious consideration must be given to the uniform branch establishing its own "intelligence arm" of groups of uniformed officers (perhaps on a special wireless channel radio) observing and reporting the changing situation to a special control



for immediate transmission to Control. This type of intelligence is now out of the province of Special Branch in serious violent confrontations.

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Superintendent