

ever encountered'. Nowadays he is shaven-headed. He almost always dresses head to toe in black. He does not want to reveal his real name - doing so, he believes, could put him at risk of physical retribution.

Black has deep-set, staring eyes and a thick jaw. At around 5ft 9in, he is short for a police officer, but stocky and strong with long arms. He admits to a 'very aggressive' dimension to his personality, one he kept suppressed 'within the normal bounds of society' for many years. However, his predilection for confrontation was unleashed when he went undercover. He confesses to enjoying the 'totally feral environment' of protests that turn violent. He is, he admits, a 'natural fighter'.

But beneath the bulldozer-like surface is a more complex character. For someone who claims to have a short temper, Black is often stone-cold calm. He can be adventurous, thoughtful and funny, when recounting the more absurd aspects of his deployment, his sombre stare usually gives way to a broad smile.

Black also has something that some of his former police colleagues lack - the ability to form solid opinions about ethical issues, regardless of what his seniors in the SDS might believe. In some ways, he is unlike many other cops. An independent thinker, Black is unafraid to voice his views, even if that means a battle with the hierarchy. And once his mind is made up, he does not take kindly to anyone who attempts to persuade him he is wrong.

That may be a trait acquired through childhood. Black was born in London in 1965 and moved to Norfolk, but by the time he was 12, his German mother and New Zealand father had divorced. His mother did not adapt well to life in a small village, and turned to drink. She struggled to bring up her three children. 'It wasn't the easiest of childhoods. I was angry a lot of the time, a lot of suppressed rage at the world,' he says. 'I did not stray too much and I realise there are plenty of people out there with

far bigger problems. [But] I was pretty much the only kid in my school whose parents were divorced. Also the fact that my mother was German caused a few problems and issues,' he says.

A turning point came at the age of 13, when he confronted a school bully. He recalls the moment as a realisation that he had the ability to achieve what he wanted. He became head boy of his school - to the headmaster's surprise - and secured nine O-levels and, later, three A-levels. Interested in the law and public affairs, he harboured an ambition to join the security services. It was an idea he dropped after an A-level teacher advised him that, realistically, MI5 'only recruited from the Oxbridge set, posh kids with public-school backgrounds'. But the teacher offered an alternative.

'He said what I had a good chance of getting into was Special Branch,' Black says. 'He explained what it was and it sounded absolutely perfect. A chance to do some of the same work as the Security Service without having to be a part of it.' Turning down a university place to study law, he enrolled in the police, determined to join the Metropolitan police's elite squad of officers. He got there in 1990, after a short spell in uniform.

Black's first Special Branch posting was to Heathrow, monitoring suspected dissidents travelling to and from Ireland. He was then in B Squad, which was investigating Irish republican and loyalist terrorists. 'It was a great time to be working in the field,' he says. 'It was such a small unit that everyone was involved in everything. I would say that between 1990 and 1993, I had a part in the case of every single terrorist arrested in London. I was either involved in interviewing them or following them or gathering other intelligence on them,' he says. Later, Black began working in C Squad, the department that had the remit of monitoring 'subversives'. 'Interestingly, I didn't really know what a subversive was until I started working for Special Branch,' he adds.