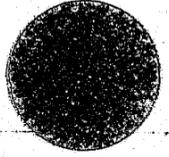


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AMSTERDAM, APRIL 30th 1980
the experience of mobile unit officers

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Ministry of Justice The Hague - Netherlands

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*The experience of
Mobile Unit Officers*

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Amsterdam, 30 April 1980: The Experience of Mobile Unit Officers

Research and Documentation Centre, 1981

E. G. M. Nuijten-Edelbrock

Introduction

The likelihood of serious disturbances at the investiture of Her Majesty Queen Beatrix on 30 April 1980 in Amsterdam had been mooted in various quarters before the event; in fact the disturbances were much more serious and on a much larger scale than had been expected. On all sides there was a shocked reaction to the events, and investigations began into the causes of the disturbances. The police associations stood up for their members and pressed for better vehicles and equipment and additional protective clothing. In the discussions with the Minister of Justice and the Minister for Home Affairs the importance of a survey of the experiences of the police officers deployed in Amsterdam was also urged. The Ministers agreed and promised the cooperation of their Ministries. The Ministry of Justice's Research and Documentation Centre subsequently designed and carried out the survey and drew up reports. At the risk of stating the obvious it should be pointed out that this survey is not concerned with the causes of these serious disturbances and the reasons behind them but examines the events of that day from the point of view of the organisation of the mobile units and, in particular, the officers in these units.

Subject of the survey

The immediate subject of the survey was the experi-

ences of the police officers involved in Amsterdam on 30 April 1980. Another question, however, is whether the events in Amsterdam have affected the view police officers have of mobile unit work, and if so, how. Yet another question is whether the officers who have changed their opinions share particular characteristics: on the one hand, factors such as age, amount of experience and rank, and on the other hand political views and their views as policemen of the police as an instrument of force; their few of the events in Amsterdam could also play a part. The subject of the survey was consequently extended to cover:

- police officers', and in particular mobile unit officers', view of the police force and above all of its function as the keeper of public order and protector of democracy;
- the view held by the mobile unit officers who were deployed in Amsterdam and took part in the police operation of the organisation of that operation and the general policy of public order on that day; the emotions they experienced that day and their subsequent treatment;
- the effect of the events in Amsterdam on views of mobile unit work; and
- whether there are groups within the mobile units on whom the events in Amsterdam had differing effects and if so, what features characterise these groups.

The survey

For practical reasons it was not possible to include all the policemen who were in Amsterdam to carry out a wide variety of tasks (mobile unit assistance, VIP protection, guarding buildings, directing traffic, criminal investigation) in the survey. Instead those officers who were deployed and took part within mobile units on 30 April were selected. To determine the size of the group use was made of organisational plans and muster-rolls for the period in question. In all about 3,200 officers were approached to take part in the survey, and a questionnaire was sent to each of them at his home address.

The questionnaire contained four blocks of questions. The first block dealt with age, the force to which the officer belonged, the number of years of service, the number of years' experience of mobile units and experience of active service in mobile units. The second dealt with political views, including indicators of the degree of acceptance of the existing social

structure, the democratic state and the function of the police in exercising authority. The third dealt with the events in Amsterdam in detail, with questions about officers' opinions of organisation, clothing and protection, the quantity and quality of vehicles and equipment available, the direction and coordination of the police operation, and policy in general; it also dealt with the emotions experienced during the operation. The fourth deals with the period subsequent to 30 April 1980, with questions on treatment, guidance and material compensation as well as any effects the events in Amsterdam may have had on opinions about the need for mobile units and personal willingness to belong to one.

Of the 3,200 or so questionnaires some 2,030 were returned. After highly incomplete questionnaires had been eliminated 1,838 remained: a response of 57 per cent. It was found that 501 of the 1,838 questionnaires related to officers who had not taken an active part within a mobile unit on 30 April 1980. A comparison by police force/Royal Military Constabulary division indicated that there were probably more officers who had also not taken an active part among the 3,200 who had been sent questionnaires, which means that the response was in fact greater.

The results relate to the mobile unit officers involved in the survey, and consequently they probably cannot be taken to apply to policemen in general. As a rule mobile unit officers are younger than the average policeman, with fewer years of service and less police experience. However, the results of the survey presumably give a representative picture of the average mobile unit officer.

Results

Of the 1,337 mobile unit officers who took an active part, about one fifth were from the Amsterdam force, about one third from other municipal forces, a quarter from National Police forces and a fifth from the Royal Military Constabulary. Below we give a summary of the personal data of the respondents and their opinions of the operation on 30 April 1980 in Amsterdam.

Personal characteristics

The ages of the mobile unit officers ranged from 18 to 57. The length of service and the length of mobile unit experience varied similarly. Four categories were distinguished:

- a a group of about 20 per cent, aged 22 or under, who had served about twelve to eighteen months in the police and less than a year in mobile units and in most cases had not previously seen active service as members of mobile units;
- b a group of about 20 per cent, aged 23-24, with three to four years of service and one to three years' mobile unit experience, who had seen active service in mobile units one to three times;
- c a group of about 30 per cent, aged 25-27, with five to seven and a half years of service and about three and a half years of mobile unit experience, who had seen active service in mobile units more than three times; and
- d a group of about 30 per cent, aged 28 or over, with over eight years of service and over five years of mobile unit experience, many of whom were in higher ranks and had seen somewhat less active service in mobile units than the previous group.

Most of the mobile unit officers from the Amsterdam force were in group a, with some in group d. Most of those from the other municipal forces were in group b. Those from the National Police forces were mainly in group c, and the Royal Military Constabulary officers were mostly in groups b and d.

Political and social views

The control and manageability of mobile units as a tool of the government for the maintenance of public order and the principles of the democratic state depend mainly on the extent to which those who put this into practice (i.e. the mobile unit officers themselves) are in agreement with this. The point was dealt with by a number of questions in the survey, relating to:

- (i) the degree of support for strict maintenance and observance of the law;
- (ii) the degree of agreement with public demonstrations against particular policies;
- (iii) the degree of agreement with police action to end such demonstrations;
- (iv) the degree of agreement with the deployment of mobile units as an integral part of the police in such demonstrations; and
- (v) party political views.

The survey showed that the majority of the mobile unit officers questioned had high scores for components (i)-(iv) and tended to vote much more conservatively

than the average Dutch voter. With the exception of two items involving consequences or conscience, over 90 per cent were in favour of the observance of the law, a higher percentage than in national sample surveys. Almost two thirds of the respondents were strongly against demonstrations, again a higher proportion than the national figure. Similar differences in relation to the national figures apply to the degree of freedom of speech, of which only a small proportion (10 per cent) were strongly in favour. Over three quarters of the respondents agreed with police action in demonstrations, again a higher percentage than in national surveys. The overwhelming majority (85 per cent) regarded mobile unit work as an integral function of the police; almost everyone agreed that mobile units should be deployed in demonstrations, sit-ins, etc., although there was some variation in the degree of agreement. It was found that the mobile unit officers tended to vote much more conservatively than the average Dutch voter at a comparable time: the CDA (Christian Democrats) and VVD (Liberals) had a strong majority, and the PvdA (Labour) was highly under-represented in comparison with national forecasts.

If we look at the scores for these components in relation to one another we find a high correlation: a high score for one component is often combined with a high score for the others. This means that a large majority (about two-thirds to three-quarters) of the mobile unit officers questioned have a very stable attitude to the existing social structure, the principles of the democratic state and the function of the police in it. Only a small group, it would seem, do not share this attitude.

Duration of duty

It was mainly the officers from the Amsterdam force who remained on duty before and after 30 April 1980, particularly after. The other mobile unit officers questioned were essentially on duty in Amsterdam only on 30 April, their period of duty extending into the next day. From the length of duty the survey showed that the officers from the Amsterdam force and the Royal Military Constabulary were the first to be actually deployed; officers from the other forces were kept on standby at their stations somewhat longer. As regards the total length of the period of duty, the mobile unit officers from the Amsterdam force in particular were active for many hours, in

some cases over eighteen hours without a break. The survey also showed that officers with broader experience of active service were called upon first, not only from the Amsterdam force but also from the National Police.

Opinions of the operation in Amsterdam

The Amsterdam police chiefs had built up an extensive organisation and outlined a specific policy to deal with the investiture ceremony. There had been little experience of an extensive organisation of this kind in Amsterdam since the Nieuwmarkt riots in 1975; this experience had to be gained afresh. To this was added the problem of insufficient coordination of strategy, tactics, communications and vehicles between the municipal police, National Police and Royal Military Constabulary units. Another special factor was the policy of exercising special caution with the deployment of mobile units and the use of force, with the requirement that use of firearms was subject to the consent of the highest authority in the organisation for the day.

To make this policy workable the lower commanding officers were left with few powers of decision and all the channels of command emanated from the overall chiefs or battalion commanders.

The mobile unit officers questioned were asked their opinion of a large number of aspects of the police operation: instructions and supervision; coordination of the operation; the role of the commanders; communications between units and platoons; clothing and protection; weapons, the quality of the vehicles and equipment available; food and drink; care of casualties; general policy on public order; and public violence and the use of force by the police.

Instructions and supervision

About a fifth of those questioned had received very few instructions and about two-fifths a reasonable or large number of instructions, both on general policy and tactical operation. The fact that the operation did not always correspond with the instructions was due mainly to officers being deployed at a different place or with a different task rather than to any lack of clarity in the instructions themselves. (It should be pointed out here that experience shows that people interpret the same instructions in different ways). Over half the respondents received a reasonable to large degree of supervision; the main lack of supervi-

sion was on arrival in Amsterdam and at the muster station.

Coordination

There was a big difference between views on coordination within a platoon and coordination between platoons and the other sections, which was regarded as considerably less satisfactory: the operation was disorganised and it was not clear how it should be carried out. The strict hierarchy in the chain of command no doubt contributed to this.

The role of the commanders

Here again there is a clear distinction between the role of the group or platoon commander and that of the higher commanders. Some of the respondents were unable to express an opinion on the role of the latter; half of the remainder found it unsatisfactory. Over three-quarters of the respondents had favourable views on the role of the lower commanders. It is conceivable that the recognisability of the role of the lower commanders and their closer personal involvement helped to form these favourable views. The blame for the unsatisfactory outcome of the police operation was laid with the higher levels.

Communications within and between platoons and units

Half to two-thirds of the respondents had an unfavourable view of communications both within a platoon and still more between platoons and units. This was caused mainly by the inadequate number of channels and the lack of uniformity in communications systems.

Clothing and protection

Two-thirds of the respondents found this reasonable on the whole. Criticisms were levelled at helmets and shields and the difference between police and Military Constabulary clothing. The Military Constabulary uniform is more vulnerable and provides less protection than the mobile unit uniform. Uniformity is called for, in both combat dress and vehicles.

Weapons

Only a quarter regarded the weapons provided as poor. Besides criticism of the weapons provided, suggestions were made for such things as rubber bullets, more tear gas and emetic gas, something to fill the gap between truncheons and firearms, and a new kind of truncheon.

Quality of the vehicles and equipment

Almost half the respondents found these poor to very poor. Criticisms were levelled mainly at the bodywork, screens, windcreens and windows of the vehicles and the low pressure of the water cannons. Here again there were differences between the police and the Royal Military Constabulary: the latter's Volkswagen minibuses provide inadequate protection despite being adapted for mobile unit work.

Food and drink

Almost three-quarters of the respondents found the provision of food and drink good. The main criticism was that there was no opportunity to eat because they were on active duty for such long periods.

Care of casualties

Just over a fifth of the respondents said they had been injured; most injuries were slight: arm and leg pains or bruising. The overwhelming majority found the assistance given to them and their colleagues reasonable to good.

General policy on public order

Over half (59 per cent) agreed with the special caution used in deploying mobile units; over a third disagreed or disagreed completely. There was less agreement with the caution in the use of force: half the respondents were not in agreement with this. When asked a general question on their opinions of the policy adopted, over half described it as bad. They thought the tactics were wrong (shutting off escape routes, keeping on the move); there was too much 'wait and see' among the chiefs, the mobile units were deployed and intervened too late; the police should have been firmer (more arrests); and there were too many links in the chain of command. As far as could be judged from previous mobile unit operations about half the respondents believed that the deployment of manpower in Amsterdam had indeed been relatively later; about half the respondents also believed that the same was true of the use of force. Most of the others believed there was no difference; only a small group believed that there had been no additional caution in the deployment of mobile units or the use of force.

Public violence and the use of force by the police

There were two questions on the amount of force: one on public violence and one on police force. The

answers indicated that the public was regarded as much more violent than the police (no doubt there is some distortion here). Compared with previous confrontations between the police and the public almost two-thirds found the confrontation on 30 April much more violent. In the view of the police too, then, the public (the troublemakers) acted much more violently than in the past. It is striking that 40 per cent of the respondents stated that they had not themselves used force. Passive endurance and the threat of retaliation evidently formed an important part of police strategy and tactics.

Taking the eleven aspects of the police operation together we find that the things which were found unsatisfactory were above all communications and coordination between the units, the overall leadership and the policy adopted, the number of instructions given, and the quality of vehicles and equipment. Consideration has now been given to improving equipment. Consideration also needs to be given to instructions: proper instructions for action and above all for policy on action are essential if the operation is to have a satisfactory outcome. In the Amsterdam case, moreover, the policy of special caution was regarded unfavourably, as was the system of command channels, which was regarded as too hierarchical and too indirect, with the disadvantage that conflicting orders arrived or orders were absent for a long period. A special point for consideration is the uniforms and vehicles of the Military Constabulary, which are not as good as those of the police, especially in violent confrontations with the public as on 30 April 1980.

Emotions, treatment and representation

Although a written survey is not the most suitable means of gauging emotions, the survey shows that the operation in Amsterdam certainly did not take place without emotions. The overwhelming majority (88 per cent) were shocked or dismayed by the public violence, even though they more or less expected a hard time. They were asked whether they experienced feelings of fear, rage, panic, indignation, powerlessness or tension in various situations. Officers even dared to admit feelings of fear and panic: fear particularly when they were being stoned and panic when casualties occurred in the group. Tension predominated more often when there was no actual confrontation: at that point feelings of rage, indignation and powerlessness

came more to the fore. It is certainly the case that the data are not entirely reliable and that officers were undoubtedly less ready to admit certain feelings. Nevertheless the survey shows that emotions are a real factor to be reckoned with.

There needs to be an opportunity to work out one's emotions after the event. It seems that there was little opportunity for this after 30 April 1980; only a third of the respondents received any kind of special treatment, although the demand was much greater. In this respect the greatest benefit was probably derived from informal conversations with colleagues and above all in the private circle of family and friends where officers could get it off their chests.

In general (three-quarters of respondents) special treatment after events of this kind was regarded as necessary or highly worthwhile. This could take various forms: a short discussion within the group immediately after the operation, an organised discussion with the platoon or group, or more individual treatment within the force.

Support was also received from the public in general, in that most reactions were favourable. Firmer action on the part of the mobile units would not have met with resistance, certainly to go by public reactions; many people were unable to comprehend why the police had been so soft.

More than half the respondents received a financial remuneration for the operation in Amsterdam; a smaller proportion were given days off. Just over half were satisfied with the remuneration. Those who were dissatisfied found the remuneration too small in view of the hours worked or the risks involved. Some officers would have liked to be able to choose between money and time off. Here too the officers of the Military Constabulary were more often critical: the remuneration paid to them was less than that paid to the police. A smaller proportion had had personal property such as spectacles or watches broken. About half of them were dissatisfied with the way this was dealt with because they had not yet received any compensation or the compensation they had received was fairly small.

A good two-thirds to three-quarters of the respondents regarded the industrial representations made by the police association as satisfactory to very satisfactory, both in connection with 30 April 1980 and in general.

To sum up the events in Amsterdam, the survey shows that about half or more of the respondents

were critical of various aspects of the police operation and policy. The organisation did not function satisfactorily, officers were very shocked by what happened and treatment after the event was inadequate. There was some variation in views on particular aspects, but in general this is true of about half of the mobile unit officers questioned. It should be pointed out that the Military Constabulary seem to have come off worse than the police, not so much as regards general policy, but as regards clothing, vehicles, equipment and remuneration.

Changes of opinion

The survey shows that about a third (36 per cent) of the mobile unit officers changed their views about mobile units as a result of the events in Amsterdam. The nature of these changes varies from the more general need to deploy mobile units on the one hand to personal willingness to serve in a mobile unit on the other. Four categories can be distinguished:

- those who have changed neither their opinions on the need for mobile units nor their own willingness - 64 per cent;
- those for whom the need and/or whose own willingness has increased - 25 per cent;
- those for whom the need and/or whose own willingness has decreased - 6 per cent; and
- those for whom the need has increased but whose own willingness has decreased - 5 per cent.

It has already been indicated above that a good majority of the mobile unit officers questioned had a more or less stable attitude to the existing social and political structure and the role of the government and police within it. The results of the survey as regards changes of opinion about mobile units show that, similarly, incidents even of a serious nature do not seem to have had any effect on a good majority. The events in Amsterdam had an effect on about a third, but more in the direction of a 'hardening' of opinion than a 'softening' or 'pragmatism'.

The survey investigated whether the mobile unit officers who changed their opinions had anything in common. It was found that those who adopted a harder attitude are to be found more often among the younger officers, in particular those who had already seen active service in mobile units on several occasions. They are somewhat more legalistically inclined, that is

to say strongly in favour of upholding the law; they tend more often to disapprove of public campaigns which might disrupt government policy or the existing social order, and they tend more often to agree that mobile units should be deployed in such cases.

Political preferences are also related to some extent: proportionately more of them vote VVD.

Among the officers who adopted a softer or more pragmatic attitude are also a higher proportion of young people, especially the youngest of all, and mainly from the Amsterdam force (although some Amsterdam officers have also hardened their attitudes).

In various respects they are the opposite side of the coin from the officers who have hardened their attitudes. They tend more often to approve of public campaigns, are less in agreement with intervention by the police or mobile units and are somewhat less strongly in favour of strict upholding of the law. In their political preferences they are more often to be found among Labour Party supporters.

The officers on whose attitudes towards mobile units the events in Amsterdam had no effect tend more often to fit the description 'older, with more years of service, not so much active mobile unit experience, of higher rank'. Otherwise they display similarities in various respects with officers whose attitudes hardened.

The effect the events in Amsterdam had is confirmed by the fact that officers who were very shocked by them tended more to change their opinions, particularly towards a softening of attitude. Opinions on the public order policy adopted also played a part in that the officers who disagreed with the idea of special caution tended more to change their views.

Conclusion

This report is certainly not the first or only reflection on the events of 30 April 1980 in Amsterdam. Broad parallels can be found in all the comments and reports. For instance, the report on 'Large-scale police operations beyond 1980'^{*} contains a large number of recommendations which are strongly supported by the results of the present survey, for example:

standardisation of the organization for large-scale police operations;

^{*} Report of the study conference held in September and December 1980 at Warnsveld under the auspices of the Police Directorate of the Ministry of Home Affairs.

- as much uniformity and standardisation as possible in weapons, clothing, equipment, vehicles and communications systems;
- the importance of good liaison prior to the actual provision of assistance so that preparations can be made, instructions received, vehicles and communications systems tested and above all contacts made with other forces;
- the importance of clear instructions to the officers taking part;
- closer adaptation of tactics to the methods of demonstrators/troublemakers;
- discussion of the present method of statically deploying formations;
- discussion of development and application of better tactics and techniques to bridge the distance between mobile units and troublemakers; and
- the importance of good logistical disbandment, for example by keeping the group together after the operation and providing an opportunity for internal evaluation and accommodation for relaxation.

The survey which is the subject of the present report was limited in its objectives, expressly emphasising the experiences of the mobile unit officers themselves and any effects of these experiences, not the actions of the mobile units. Any survey is likely to raise new questions for research, and this is true of the present survey. The results raise four key questions which this survey has not answered and, in our view, are of such importance that they should be studied; nor do these proposals include research into the action of the mobile units.

The first question is whether the view we have obtained of the political opinions of the mobile unit officers questioned is true of the police as a whole. This is virtually new ground, about which little is known as yet. A sample survey would have to be held among the Dutch police as a whole to provide information on this.

The second question is what the effects of the use of force are on policemen, in both the short and the long term. The present survey has shown that young people with little or no mobile unit experience were deployed in an operation of a scale which would lead one to expect serious disturbances. If it is found that it is precisely these people who harden their attitudes, it may be wondered whether young policemen who have only just completed their training ought to be deployed

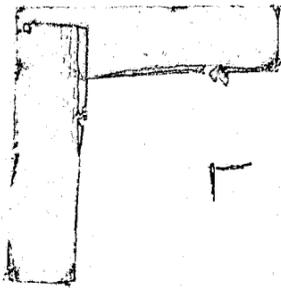
in operations of this kind. It would probably be advisable to allow some time to elapse between finishing at police school and beginning the mobile unit training course or at least going on duty as a mobile unit officer.

In the short term the effects could make themselves felt in the exercise of duties in the first few days following a mobile unit operation. Emotions may be expressed in ordinary police work, in contacts with the public. In the longer term an officer might become unable to carry on his work or might resign from the force. Research would seem to be necessary to establish whether such effects have occurred or are likely to occur in the future.

During the operation many mobile unit officers apparently experienced various emotions and feelings, panic and fear as well as powerlessness, indignation and tension; it is not known what effect this stress had on them and how they coped with it during the operation. After the operation the officers also apparently needed an outlet for their emotions; nor is it known how they coped with the subsequent emotions.

A large proportion of the officers involved in the survey were found to hold similar views on certain political and social topics. The fourth question is whether this is influenced by the education and training received by officers.

The police is a relatively new area of study in the Netherlands. There is a lot more to police work than just mobile unit work. We believe, however, there could be some dangers if the attention paid to the mobile units were to predominate over that given to the police in general. First and foremost the organisation of the police would become geared more and more to specialised mobile unit work and less to ordinary police work. It is also conceivable - in the light of the results of this survey - that the mobile unit officers themselves might change their opinions and attitudes towards ordinary police work and mobile unit work. Lastly, the mobile unit aspect might change the public's idea and acceptance of the police. One day a policeman uses hardhanded force as a member of a mobile unit and the next he does his patrols or works as a neighbourhood policeman; the danger is that the police could become less approachable to the public.



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