

## **PARALLELS IN POLICING IV**

**By: Chief Coan**

In past Newsletter articles I have chronicled my ride-along experiences in New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago. With having observed first-hand metropolitan police operations on the East and West Coasts, as well as in the Mid-West, I recently had an opportunity to compare those experiences with police work in the South. While attending the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) Conference in New Orleans, I had the opportunity to ride-along with an officer of the New Orleans Police Department.

Nearly three years after Hurricane Katrina flooded 80 percent of New Orleans and drove half its citizens away, it is today a place of profound contrasts. It is now entirely possible for a visitor to land at the refurbished international airport, drive to the renovated downtown, stay at a remodeled hotel, eat at a nice restaurant, visit historical sites and not ever see a hint of the natural disaster that befell the city or witness any of the crime and poverty that plagues many of its neighborhoods.

New Orleans has really become three contrasting cities in one: a renovated and tourism friendly downtown, an impoverished inner city with high crime and dilapidated homes and housing projects, and an outer ring of wealthier neighborhoods and suburbs that have built back up since the hurricane.

There are still thousands of rotted and ruined houses crisscrossing the city. New Orleans has one of the highest crime rates in the country. Last year the city suffered 161 murders making it per capita one of the deadliest cities in America. Already this year, the city has experienced 163 murders.

During the three days that I attended the IACP Conference there were six homicides and eight people shot in New Orleans, including an off-duty police officer who was severely wounded when three armed men invaded his home in a robbery attempt. The shooting of a police officer in his own home shocked even the NOPD's rank and file who have witnessed their share of violence and tragedy in recent years. Unfortunately, armed robberies and shootings have become disturbingly common in what were once peaceful neighborhoods.

They say that Hurricane Katrina did not create New Orleans' problems. Violence, poverty, a dysfunctional court system, corrupt politicians, and a distrusted police force have long plagued the City. New Orleans is called "The Big Easy" for many reasons. Not only for its approach to life, but for the corruption that have long been a part of its culture.

The problems of New Orleans have been further exacerbated by a depleted police force that is only now regaining its authorized strength. The New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) is currently comprised of just over 1,000 officers with an authorized staffing level of 1,400 officers (similar in size to the Milwaukee Police Department). The NOPD is divided into six bureaus, each commanded by a Deputy Chief. The Department is also sub-divided into eight police patrol districts, each of which is commanded by a District Commander with the rank of Captain.

Within each district station there are several units assigned, including Uniformed Patrol, a District Investigative Unit, Special Events, Crime Prevention, and School Liaison. Other resources including Tactical Response, Homicide, and Administrative Support had been housed in a central station and administrative center downtown. That center was severely damaged during the storm and now those entities work out of temporary trailers located adjacent to a remote district police station.

I arranged to do my ride-along in the 8<sup>th</sup> District, a highly diverse area of city. Officers operate out of a very unique turn of the century station house. The New Orleans Police Department's 8<sup>th</sup> District is staffed by 104 sworn officers and serves a geographical area which includes the historic French Quarter and Central Business District of the city. Also included in its patrol area are many historic sites, major financial and medical complexes, world renowned convention and sports facilities, and some of the impoverished and crime ridden areas of the city.

The 8<sup>th</sup> District officers pride themselves for being known as the "Masters of Crowd Control", having primary policing responsibilities for events such as the annual Mardi Gras in the French Quarter and numerous other special events, parades, festivals, and conventions. They also have to contend with areas of high street crime, prostitution, muggings, and homelessness.

On a very warm Monday night in October, I rode-along with Officer Stephen Brunelle, a seven year veteran of the NOPD. Brunelle is a young, energetic, and well educated police officer who is awaiting final confirmation of a recent promotion to the rank of Detective with appointment to the Homicide Unit. An assignment that will no doubt keep him extremely challenged.

Officer Brunelle was very candid in his assessment of his department and of City government in general. He was very concerned about corruption and the quality of recruits that are being hired to replenish the depleted ranks of the NOPD. He also noted that most of the middle and upper class have yet to return to the City. Instead, there has been a steady return of the poor which has placed considerable burden on the police, the school system, and social welfare agencies in New Orleans.

Officer Brunelle received permission to cross district boundaries in order to show me the New Orleans that is not depicted in any of the travel brochures. It was a surreal experience seeing vast areas of still damaged and rotting homes and boarded up businesses. It was particularly eerie to see whole abandoned neighborhoods without lights and without people or traffic moving about. A surreal landscape that you have to see to believe!

In other neighborhoods where people had returned there were still blocks and blocks of ramshackle homes and dilapidated housing projects. The housing projects are where most of the homicides are taking place. Poverty, poor housing, gangs, drug dealing, and domestic disputes are all factors contributing to a very violent urban environment.

In a City of stark contrasts, Officer Brunelle also drove us the length of Bourbon Street. One of the most famous streets in America was teeming with people on a Monday night. There are no open container laws in New Orleans and most people crowding the street were holding cups of beer and exotic looking drinks. Live music could be heard coming from many of the clubs and bars that line the eight block street which runs the length of the French Quarter.

There were bawdy strip clubs and numerous taverns interspersed with nice restaurants, garish souvenir shops, and assorted tourist "attractions". A pretty decadent and raucous atmosphere that even on a good night would be difficult to police! Officers on horseback, foot patrols (uniformed and plain clothed), and officers on scooters patrolled the busy street. Officer Brunelle said that there are no restrictions on closing times and that most of the bars stay open all night long. Drunken brawls pick pocketing, prostitution, and street muggings are common place.

The only possible comparison to policing in Whitewater that I can make is that if we had to contend with Homecoming, Graduation, and St. Patrick's Day every single night of the year. It would certainly make for a very challenging and stressful environment to police night after night.

As we drove around the City, Officer Brunelle lamented about the lack of staffing and the precipitous rise in crime since Katrina. He was also concerned about their lack of equipment. They have no mobile data computers and no long weapons of any kind in their squad cars. Officer Brunelle was particularly displeased that officers are not allowed to carry Tasers. It did make me think that certainly at the line level we are much better equipped than officers of the NOPD.

I found Stephen Brunelle to be a first rate police officer. Like many of the officers that I rode with in Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City, he is doing police work in a very tough and challenging environment. There are more comparisons among these officers than differences.

Many of the calls and situations that these officers face are similar to situations we deal with here, e.g. people drinking to excess, domestic disputes, medical emergencies, fights, traffic problems, etc. Granted, the crime and disorder found in New Orleans is on a much larger scale than what we find here in Whitewater. Nevertheless, everything is relative and good police officers are found everywhere doing the best that they can in sometimes very difficult and challenging situations.

As I have witnessed our own officers conduct themselves in a very poised and professional manner, so too I found the officers of the NOPD. My ride-along again reminded me that no matter where police work is practiced and in whatever size organization it is undertaken, the essence of police work can be found just about anywhere. Though this is not necessarily such a revelation, it does serve as a profound reminder that we are part of a larger “brother and sister hood” (one that few people have the privilege of belonging to).

So whether you police one of America’s largest cities, or a small college town in the Mid-West, there are certain parallels in policing. My ride-along experiences remind that police officers everywhere are routinely exposed to various kinds of traumatic events and daily pressures which require a certain toughness of attitude, temperament, and training. Most police officers are very ethical, highly professional, and extremely dedicated to their work. I remain very proud to be part of such a noble and courageous profession.