

## CHAPTER 5

# IS WHAT COMMANDOS DO USEFUL?

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The previous three chapters should have given the reader a sense of what it is Commandos do in regard to their mandate of assisting the SAPS in combating crime. Is what they do useful? This question is perhaps best answered by going right back to basics and asking in the most general and abstract terms what it is that visible policing agencies do to reduce crime.

### **Visible policing and crime reduction**

The last three decades or so have seen a slew of policing experiments across the globe, each attempting to forge creative ways of reducing crime. These experiments can broadly be divided into three or four innovations. The first is called hotspot policing or targeted patrols. It is based on the observation that crime is never distributed evenly across an urban suburb or a rural district. It clusters around particular addresses, times of day, days of the week and seasons. The result, as crime prevention theorist Lawrence Sherman has put it, is that giving each part of a police jurisdiction its “fair share” of policing “may be as useful as giving everyone his fair share of penicillin – regardless of whether the person is sick”.<sup>26</sup>

At its simplest, the idea of hotspots or targeted patrols is to place visible police patrols where and when crime happens. There are large variations, both tactical and philosophical, within the idea of hotspot policing. At one extreme, police in a hotspot may be entirely passive and play what amounts to a security guard function – simply guarding the property and people in a hotspot. A particularly stark example of this is SAPS Uitenhage’s deployment of civilians in bright green bibs in CBD hotspots, discussed in chapter three. At the other extreme, police may cordon off an entire hotspot and search every sugar bowl and underwear drawer within the cordon. How passive or active hotspot policing should be is a matter of endless debate.<sup>27</sup>

A second innovation in crime prevention involves identifying and controlling risk factors. Strictly speaking, this is about directing police officers to look out for things which have been identified as causing elevated risks to public

harm. For instance, police may evaluate that the single largest risk factor in the incidence of serious violent crime on weekend evenings in a particular jurisdiction is the combination of alcohol and knives. Controlling for risk factors might then consist of visiting every tavern and shebeen in the area and searching patrons for weapons.

A third development in crime prevention, perhaps the most innovative in the last 30 years, has been dubbed problem-oriented policing, or POP. POP essentially takes the logic and methods of public health and epidemiology and applies them to policing.<sup>28</sup> The principle is a variant of the old fashioned “prevention is better than cure” motto. For instance, tuberculosis was largely eliminated in the developed world when public health analysts identified the social practices that stimulate its transmission and eliminated them through public campaigns and social work programmes. In theory, POP does the same thing with crime. It consists of breaking crime patterns down to micro details, reducing each micro pattern to a particular problem or cluster of problems, and then managing or solving that problem.

For instance, the theft of copper pivots on sprinkling systems could hypothetically be curtailed by developing an alternative sprinkling technology which does not require copper; by a successful public appeal to consumers not to buy stolen copper; or, to take the logic of this argument to its absurd extreme, by abandoning irrigation farming for rainfall crop farming. In all three variants of the example, the principle is the same: instead of chasing copper thieves or guarding sprinklers, remove the opportunity or the rationale for stealing copper.

In South Africa, the SAPS has developed a strong penchant for the first of these three innovations – hotspot policing. Whether at station, area or provincial level, whether in the heart of metropolitan Gauteng or in the farflung reaches of the eastern Free State, whether in regard to housebreaking, street robberies or car theft, the SAPS operates by accumulating as much manpower as it can and throwing it at hotspots. Styles of hotspot policing vary widely. A settlement of tens of thousands of people may be cordoned and searched, with airborne support, armoured vehicles and a battalion of public order police. Or a civilian in a bib may be assigned to guard a problematic street corner. But the broad principle is the same; the SAPS polices by saturating hotspots.

Why the organisation has gone this route is subject for another time. Suffice it to say that the SAPS is a large centralised national police service facing high crimes levels and urgent demands for service; that it inherited a fairly poor

stock of human capital and had to work immediately with what resources it had; that under these conditions, throwing numbers at problems was perhaps the best choice available; and that the SAPS has indeed mobilised its resources with admirable efficiency.<sup>29</sup>

### **Reducing crime in the countryside**

Of these three innovations – hotspot policing, risk factor identification and problem-oriented policing – which would be most, and which least, propitious to the policing of rural areas? From the vantage point of crime prevention, rural areas differ from cities in at least two respects. First, people are more spread out than in cities, and second, people are less anonymous.

Let us deal first with the second point: anonymity. In urban environments, strangers live in close proximity to one another. The anonymity of urban spaces is a predatory criminal’s strongest advantage. The pedestrian who is mugged or the cashier who is robbed at gunpoint hardly ever knows the perpetrator by name or sight. And even if he is identified through eye witness identikits, fingerprints or DNA, there is no guarantee he will be found; in cities it is possible to disappear.

In several countries throughout the world, it has been observed that the rate of property crimes is much the same in urban and rural areas, but that the rate of violent crime is much higher in cities than in the countryside. Some crime theorists argue that this is because rural communities possess far stronger “informal controls” over their members than urban communities do.<sup>30</sup> But this is perhaps simply a way of saying that in rural communities people are less anonymous than in urban communities. Property crime is by its nature about concealment. Violent crime is by its nature personal and unconcealed. Knowing that you will be identified, that the police will know your address, your family, your place of work, is a strong deterrent to committing violent crime.

One should not exaggerate the density of acquaintanceships in the countryside, especially in country like South Africa. Rural areas do host large informal, first generation settlements where neighbours may be relative strangers. Some rural settlements also host large, transitory populations; a great many people move incessantly between town and countryside, without settling permanently in either. Nonetheless, acquaintanceships are undeniably denser in rural than in urban South Africa, and the difference profoundly shapes both crime and crime fighting. For instance, where investigations into predatory crimes committed in the countryside are sufficiently resourced,

conviction rates are many times higher than for comparable crimes in urban areas. A comparative docket analysis conducted in the Eastern Cape, for instance, found that between 2000 and 2001, the conviction rate for house robberies committed on farms was 43%, while the rate for urban robberies was six percent.<sup>31</sup> Some commentators have provided creative and eccentric explanations for this discrepancy, such as the use of specialist tracker teams.<sup>32</sup> But a crucial factor must surely be that in rural areas there are fewer opportunities to disappear into anonymity.

The second difference works in the opposite direction. Rural areas are more sparsely populated than urban areas. And if people are more spread out, so is property. This makes the police's security guard function far less effective in rural than in urban areas. Property that is widely dispersed is more difficult to guard than property that is concentrated. For instance, an urban law firm's property may consist of a building and everything contained in it – furniture, office infrastructure, a large collection of electronic equipment, perhaps a pool of cars in the basement. A farmer's property, in contrast, may consist of a herd of beef cattle spread over several thousand of hectares of land; or a sprinkler system located in a remote, unlit acreage several kilometres from the nearest human settlement. Rural hotspots are too dispersed to be saturated or contained.

This is not to say that hotspot policing is impossible in rural areas. Crime still accumulates around specific times and places. In chapter four, for instance, we saw that the West Rand Commando was aware that in regard to stock theft 1) the high risk times of month were full moon and the period before pension payout day 2) most stolen stock was sold in Bekkersdal 3) there were only a handful of viable cattle trails between Randfontein sector 7 and Bekkersdal. Stock theft patrols were thus blind to neither time nor place. But the hotspot zone was enormous, the group of personnel on patrol small.

If all this is true – that rural areas are far more conducive to the policing of people than the guarding of things – it would follow that hotspot policing in rural areas stands a far smaller chance of reducing crime than problem-oriented policing. For instance, it is far easier to steal a head of cattle undetected than to sell stolen beef without people knowing that you stole it and where you stole it from. In the three cases studies above, the perpetrators and victims of stock theft were near neighbours; whether across the border in Lesotho, in the informal settlement outside Despatch, or in Bekkersdal, meat was generally sold publicly, on the streets, within 20km from where it was stolen. Victims of stock theft probably rubbed shoulders with someone who had bought stolen meat whenever they went shopping in town.

All things being equal, then, it would be more efficient to police stock theft by policing the meat market than by guarding herds of livestock. A community policing initiative which used civilians' eyes, ears and moral approbation should, theoretically, be a more potent weapon against most categories of rural property crime than guarding property. Recall the Ladybrand vegetable farmer from chapter two who complained that the presence of the SANDF on the borderline with Lesotho had worsened relations between Basotho peasants and white farmers. He claimed that in the half-century his family had farmed in the district, they had dealt with grazing theft by constantly renegotiating the mutual rules of neighbourliness. He was essentially saying that in the context of the countryside's lack of anonymity, a context where the identities of perpetrators are no secret to anybody, solving problems is far more efficacious than guarding property.

And yet all things are not equal, and the Ladybrand farmer is only partially right; for a crucial characteristic of rural South Africa we have not discussed in this section is social division, and it changes everything.

### **Policing in the context of social complexity**

Aside from the themes of informal control and the density of acquaintanceships, there is another, crucial, theme in the international literature on rural policing. In the United States, a comparative study conducted in Maryland in the late 1980s examined the relationship between a police agency's staff numbers, the size of its jurisdiction, and its effectiveness in solving reported crimes. The results were somewhat counterintuitive. It turned out that neither the size of a police agency nor the size of its jurisdiction were important determinants in success rates. Rather, the main determinant was social complexity. The more socially homogenous the population of a police jurisdiction, the more crimes the police solved, no matter what the ratio of police officers to population, and no matter how big the policing agency's physical jurisdiction. The greater the social complexity of the jurisdiction, the less effective policing was.<sup>33</sup>

In the United States, which is heavily over-represented in the international literature on rural crime, rural police jurisdictions are usually characterised by a high degree of social homogeneity.<sup>34</sup> In South Africa, this is hardly ever the case, as is abundantly evident in all three case studies above. A single rural police station is often responsible for policing both a town with a five- or six-figure population, and remote farmland. In a jurisdiction like Uitenhage, two 24-hour patrol vans are typically responsible for patrolling a stark divide between industrial, urban and deep rural.

Policing property crimes across deep social divides is an unforgiving task. Take an informal, rural settlement with a large informal meat market. If the meat sold in that market is stolen primarily from subsistence farmers and survivalists in the settlement itself, the presence of the market will create communal and moral strife. The losers will take issue with the winners, and the broader community will take sides. This sort of scenario cries out for a community or problem-oriented policing response. Galvanising the community's moral approbation is potentially far more effective than guarding livestock.

Yet if the meat sold in the informal settlement's door-to-door market is stolen from a commercial farming district 20 km away, it is unlikely that consumers are going to ask too many questions about where it came from. It is simply cheap and convenient; it saves a trip to town, and the meat is less expensive and of a better quality than supermarket meat. Nobody loses. Everybody wins. This is surely one of the reasons why Gatsrand Commando members told us in chapter four that Khutsong SAPS finds it very difficult to gather information about the township's pension day meat market. The market retails in public, on the street, during daylight hours. The market players are anything but anonymous. They are protected by the absence of moral censure.

Two points arise. First, when property crimes are committed across deep social divides, the density of acquaintanceships in the countryside does not assist with policing. For although the perpetrators are not anonymous, they are sheltered by the politics and the culture of the social divide itself. This leads directly to the second point: when property crimes are committed across deep social divides, hotspot policing, as blunt and imperfect as it may be, is arguably the most effective form of policing. Once the livestock crosses the social divide, it is rendered invisible and thus irretrievable by social norms. The remaining option, then, is simply to guard it.

That is precisely the humble and inelegant task the non-area bound units of Commandos perform, at least when they are doing their jobs well. They are, it should be said, a blunt instrument: armed soldiers without the power to arrest or apprehend, indeed without the power to patrol at all in the absence of a police officer. But when their deployment is based on sound intelligence, when they are placed in the right places at the right times, the type of passive hotspot policing they perform is perhaps the most effective form of policing available in regard to agricultural crime. As we noted earlier, rural hotspots are generally larger, more fluid, and less sharply delineated than urban hotspots. Policing them thus meets with varying degrees of success.

Commandos are not an antidote to agricultural crime. But the sort of policing they have been doing over the last decade may be the best available.

When deployed poorly or ill advisedly, Commandos can, and in some areas of the country have been known to, play a particularly destructive role. When every gathering of black people around a crate of beer is deemed to be a hotspot; when every rural drinking establishment in the countryside is deemed a potential source of crime; when every rural settlement is regarded as a hideout for criminals, Commandos begin to aggravate racial tensions and to do their jobs inequitably. That is when they begin to police the property of one constituency by invading the privacy and violating the dignity of another. The type of "hotspot policing" with which Commandos ought to be involved is discreet and passive.

That is a long answer to the question: Is what Commandos do useful? The answer is yes. In the context of property crimes committed across social divides, mobilising feet on the ground to police hotspots is indeed among the more effective modes of policing agricultural crime. We turn now to the question of what will happen to this capacity if and when it is absorbed into the SAPS. Is the SAPS able to absorb it, keep it, and deploy it to the same ends it is being deployed now? Or will the very nature of this capacity be transformed by its absorption into the SAPS? If so, what will the consequences be? All these questions can be condensed into one: What will the closure of the Commandos mean for the policing of agricultural crime?