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A Former Denver Police Officer

Mort Stern

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POLICE SCIENCE

WHAT MAKES A POLICEMAN GO WRONG?*

An Ex-member of the Force Traces the Steps on Way from Law Enforcement to Violating

A FORMER DENVER POLICE OFFICER
As Told to MORT STERN

During the last two years, the police world has been shaken by a series of scandals in major departments—Chicago, Kansas City, and most recently Denver. Of these the most serious by far has been the Denver police scandal which at this time is still actively under investigation and the department under reorganization. Thirty-five police officers have been implicated according to a report in the *Denver Post* (October 1, 1961) “in crimes ranging from bigtime safecracking to gambling and prostitution.” With this background the Editorial Board found Mort Stern’s article extremely timely and thought provoking, and we are very pleased to have the opportunity to reprint it in its entirety.

Mort Stern is Editor of the Editorial Page of the *Denver Post*. He was appointed to this present position in 1958 having served for two years as Managing Editor of the paper and in various staff positions since 1951. Mr. Stern is a visiting lecturer in journalism at Colorado Woman’s College, Denver, and formerly, at the University of Denver. Mr. Stern has been active in a number of journalistic organizations.—EDITOR.

What makes a cop go sour? I can tell you. I was a Denver cop until not so long ago. Then I quit so I could hold my head up.

Yes, I’ll tell you, but you won’t like it. It isn’t a pretty story and it involves you.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not trying to shift the burden of responsibility for the burglaries, break-ins, safe jobs and that sort of thing. That’s bad, very bad. But I’ll leave it to the big shots and the newspapers and the courts to say and do what needs to be said and done about that.

My concern is about the individual cop, the ordinary, hard-working, basically honest but awfully hard-pressed guy who’s really suffering now. He should be your concern, too.

He has a job to do, the most important one in the city. And, with a few rare exceptions, he starts out to do it honestly, the best way he knows how.

Young fellows don’t put on those blue uniforms to be crooks. There are a lot of reasons, but for most of the guys it adds up to the fact that they thought it was an honorable, decent way to make a living.

Somewhere along the way a guy’s disillusioned. Along the way the pressures mount up. Some-

* Reprinted with permission from the SUNDAY DENVER POST, October 8, 1961.

where along the way he may decide to quit fighting them and make the conscious decision to try to “beat” society instead.

But long before he gets to that point, almost as soon as he dons the uniform in fact, he is taking the first little steps down the road that does, for some, eventually lead to the penitentiary.

Let me back up a little. I want to talk about how you get to be a policeman, because this is where the trouble really starts.

You citizens could easily find out about these things if you took a little time to check. But you’ve got other things on your mind—until there’s a scandal and then 700 cops are wallowing in mud.

Almost any able-bodied man can become a policeman in Denver.

If he’s within the age brackets, if he’s a high school graduate, if he has no criminal record, he’s a cinch. At that, there aren’t enough applicants to fill the vacancies. Maybe it has something to do with the pay, the hours, the risks. There could be other reasons, but you don’t know them until you get in.

There isn’t much to getting through the screening, and some bad ones do get through. Some are caught in training. Some are not spotted until later—until too late.

There are the usual examinations and questionnaires. I don't know how closely the questionnaires are checked, but I know of a case where a homosexual with a bad record got through the screening.

Then there's the interview. A few command officers ask you questions. There's a representative of civil service and a psychiatrist present.

They ask the predictable questions, and just about everybody gives the predictable answers: "Why do you want to be a policeman? I've always wanted to be a policeman. I want to help people." Five or ten minutes and its over.

Five or ten minutes to spot the sadist, the psychopath—or the guy with an eye for an easy buck. And everybody's giving the same answers. I guess they weed some out. Some others they get at the Police Academy. But some get through.

Along with those few bad ones, there are more good ones, and a lot of average, ordinary human beings that have this in common: They want to be policemen.

The job has (or had) some glamour for the young man who likes authority, who finds appeal in making a career of public service, who's extroverted and aggressive.

Before you knock those qualities, remember two things: First, they're the same qualities we admire in a business executive. Second, if it weren't for men with those qualities, you wouldn't have any police protection.

There's also the factor that a police career can look like an honorable answer to your own environment, a way out if you please.

I grew up in a tough neighborhood back East. The Irish were a minority. We got pushed, and we pushed back. You grew up to be a cop or a crook—or a hod carrier. I didn't want to carry a hod.

I had seen some dishonest cops, but I admired the honest ones and I grew up wanting to be one. I knocked around a little and then came to Denver. A friend from back home was a policeman. We talked, and I applied.

I passed the screening and was on my way to the Police Academy.

The Police Academy is point No. 2 in my bill of particulars. It's a fine thing, in a way. You meet the cream of the Police Department. Your expectations soar. This is really it. You know you're going to make the grade and be a good officer. But how well are you really prepared?

There are six weeks at the academy—four weeks

in my time. Six hectic weeks in which to learn all about the criminal laws you've sworn to enforce, to assimilate the rules of evidence, methods of arbitration, use of firearms, mob and riot control, first aid (including, if you please, some basic obstetrics), public relations, and on and on.

There's an intangible something else that's not on the formal agenda. You begin to learn that this is a fraternity into which you are not automatically accepted by your fellows. You have to earn your way in; you have to establish that you're "all right."

And even this early there's a slight sour note. You knew, of course, that you had to provide your own uniforms, your own hat, shoes, shirts, gun, and bullets out of your \$393 a month.

You knew that the city would generously provide you with the cloth for two pair of trousers and a uniform blouse.

What you didn't know was that you don't just choose a tailor shop for price and get the job done.

You are sent to a place by the police department to get the tailoring done. You pay the price even though the work may be ill-fitting. It seems a little odd to you that it's always the same establishment. But it's a small point, and you have other things on your mind.

So the rookie, full of pride and high spirit, his head full of partially-learned information is turned over to a more experienced man for breaking in. He is on "probation" for six months.

He knows he is being watched by all the older hands around him. He senses that an unfavorable report turned in by a senior man could blackball him. He watches closely what the others do. He is eager to be accepted.

He does what he can to show he has guts. He backs up his partner in any way he can. He accepts advice gracefully.

Then he gets little signs that he's making a good impression. It may happen like this: The older man stops at a bar, comes out with some packages of cigarettes. He does this several times. He explains that this is part of the job, getting cigarettes free from proprietors to re-sell and that as part of the rookie's training it is his turn to "make the butts."

So he goes in to a Skid Row bar and stands uncomfortably at the end waiting for the bartender to acknowledge his presence and disdainfully toss him two packages of butts.

The feeling of pride slips away, and a hint of

shame takes hold. But he tells himself this is unusual, that he will say nothing that will upset his probation standing.

In six months, after he gets his commission, he will be the upright cop he meant to be when he applied for the job, when he took his oath and when he left the Police Academy.

One thing leads to another for the rookies. After six months they have become conditioned to accept free meals, a few packs of cigarettes, turkeys at Thanksgiving and liquor at Christmas from the respectable people in their district.

The rule book forbids all this. But it isn't enforced. It's winked at, at all levels.

So the rookies say to themselves that this is okay, that all the men accept these things, that it is a far cry from stealing and they can still be good policemen. Besides, they are becoming accepted as "good guys" by their fellow officers.

This becomes more and more important as the young policeman begins to sense a hostility toward him in the community. This is fostered to a degree by some of the saltier old hands in the department. But the public plays its part.

All the rookie's contacts with the public seem to be negative. Americans are funny. They have a resentment for authority. And the policeman is authority in person. The respectable citizen may soon forget that a policeman found his lost kid in the park, but he remembers that a policeman gave him a traffic ticket.

The negative aspect about the job builds up. The last thing a cop does before he leaves home is check to see that his pistol is on and loaded. The majority of the people he comes in contact with during his working hours are thieves, con men, dope addicts, and out and out nuts.

He's in this atmosphere at least eight hours a day, six days a week, and he's not paid overtime when they require more of his time on the street or in court.

Off the job his associations narrow. Part of the time when he isn't working, he's sleeping. His waking, off-duty hours are such as to make him not much of a neighbor. And then he wants to spend as much of it as he can with his family.

Sometimes, when he tries to mix with his neighbors, he senses a kind of strain. When he is introduced to someone, it's not apt to be "This is John Jones, my friend" or "my neighbor." It's more likely to be, "This is John Jones, he's a policeman."

And the other fellow, he takes it up, too. He's

likely to tell you that he's always supported pay increases for policemen, that he likes policemen as a whole, but that there are just a few guys in uniform he hates.

No wonder the cop begins to think of himself as a member of the smallest minority group in the community. The idea gradually sinks in that the only people that understand him, that he can be close to, are his fellow officers. His associations become even further limited and he begins to believe the old phrase, "Nobody likes us, so the hell with them."

It is in this kind of atmosphere that you find the young policeman trying to make the grade in the fraternity. But that's not the whole story.

A policeman lives with tensions, and with fears.

Part of the tensions come from the incredible monotony. He is cooped up with another man, day after day, hour after hour, doing routine things over and over. The boredom of routine makes him want to scream sometimes. The excitement that most people think of as the constant occupation of policemen is so infrequent as to come as a relief.

Part of the tensions come from the manifold fears. I don't mean that these men are cowards. This is no place for cowards. But they are human beings. And fears work on all human beings. Paramount is the physical fear, the fear that he will get hurt to the point where he can't go on working, or the fear that he will be killed. The fear for his family.

There's the fear that he'll make a wrong decision in a crucial moment, a life or death decision. A man's been in a fight. Should he call the paddy wagon or the ambulance? A man aims a gun at him. Should he try to talk to him, or shoot him?

But the biggest fear he's got is that he'll show fear to some of his fellow officers. This is the reason he'll rush heedlessly in on a cornered burglar or armed maniac if a couple of cops are present, in spite of all his fears—something he wouldn't do if he were alone.

He's tormented by his fears, and he doesn't dare show them. He knows he's got to present a cool, calm front to the public.

As a group, policemen have a very high rate of ulcers, heart attacks, suicides, and divorces. These things torment him, too. Divorce is a big problem to policemen. A man can't be a cop for eight hours and then just turn it off and go home and be a loving father and husband—particularly

if he's just had somebody die in the back of his police car.

So once again, the pressure is on him to belong, to be accepted and welcomed into the only group that knows what's going on inside him.

If the influences aren't right, he can be hooked.

So he's at the stage where he wants to be one of the guys. And then this kind of thing may happen: One night his car is sent to cover in on a "Code 26"—a silent burglar alarm. This may mean that a burglar has broken into a business place.

He and his partner go in to investigate. The burglar is gone. They call the proprietor. He comes down to look things over. And maybe he says, "Boys, this is covered by insurance, so why don't you take a jacket for your wife, or a pair of shoes?" And maybe he does, maybe just because his partner does, and he says to himself "What the hell, who's been hurt?"

Or maybe the proprietor didn't come down. But after they get back in the car his partner pulls out four \$10 bills and hands him two. "Burglar got careless," says the partner.

The young cop who isn't involved himself soon learns that this kind of thing goes on. He may even find himself covering in on a burglary call, say to a drug store, and see some officers there eyeing him peculiarly.

Maybe at this point the young cop feels the pressure to belong so strongly that he reaches over and picks up something, cigars perhaps. Then he's "in," and the others can do what they wish.

Mind you, not all cops will do this. Somewhere along the line all of them have to make a decision, and it is at that point where the stuff they're made of shows through. But the past experience of the handouts, the official indifference to them, and the pressures and tensions of the job don't make the decision any easier.

And neither he nor the department has had any advance warning, such as might come from thorough psychiatric screening, as to what his decision will be.

Some men may go this far and no farther. They might rationalize that they've not done anything that isn't really accepted by smart people in society. Maybe they can't see anybody getting hurt by this (not even themselves), and they let it go at that.

This is no doubt where the hard core guy, the one who is a thief already, steps in. A policeman is a trained observer, and he's smart in back alley psychology. This is especially true of the hard

core guy, and he's been watching the young fellows coming along.

When he and his cronies in a burglary ring spot a guy who may have what it takes to be one of them, they may approach him and try him out as a lookout. From then on it is just short steps to the actual participation in and planning of crimes.

Bear in mind that by this stage we've left all but a few cops behind. But all of them figure in the story at one stage or other. And what has happened to a few could happen to others. I suppose this is the main point I am trying to make.

I don't pretend to have a lot of answers. But I can suggest a few.

Let's begin with higher pay, and some better system than repeated elections where the cops and the fireman, unlike any other groups of employes, have to go out and ask for a citywide vote everytime the cost of living goes up.

Let's put the salary high enough to do two things.

First, put it high enough so the cop doesn't have to get a second job, as half of the men now do, in order to give his family the things others can have with just one 40-hour-a-week job. Let's put an end to this kind of resentment and tension.

Second, let's put the salary up high enough so the department can be selective enough in the first place. You're not going to stop a man from stealing just by giving him a pay raise. But with an attractive enough salary you can get enough applications from high type men to be choosy about the ones you pick.

And when the time comes that you can be choosy, for Pete's sake, be very choosy. I'm no expert on the subject, but I think a much more careful screening is called for. Check applications thoroughly. Have a whole series of psychiatric tests. And upgrade the requirements.

Then, when you've got the best possible police candidates, train them properly. Give them a long training.

The best departments give up to six months' schooling. Install a program of continuous on-the-job training. Inform the officer of new laws and of their effect on his method of performing his duties.

Equip him properly. Furnish it to him and hold him responsible for keeping it in good condition. Make him and his equipment pass a daily inspection.

Now we're talking about discipline. That's got to be firm. The lack of proper discipline—for

many years—has been a great failing of the Denver Police Department. The men must know where they stand. They must know what they can do and what they may not do.

The larger departments have learned through experience that an active internal affairs division—one to keep check on the men—is necessary. As an ex-cop this isn't easy for me to say, but I know it has got to be.

Then when a man goes over the line even for just a little bit, whether he's a rookie or an old salt, crack down on him. But make punishment fair and even. In the Denver department the men believe some are punished while others are let off for the same offenses.

Make promotions a matter of merit, not a matter of favoritism or departmental politics. Promote men for quality, not on the basis of race, religion, or membership in fraternal organizations. The men believe this happens now.

These are things you good citizens must insist on, or they will not be done. You—not any politicians—are the ones the good, honest cops are counting on to set things right again.

Take an interest in the policeman, his family, his tensions, his fears, his standing in the community, and his future and you'll be buying yourself the best possible insurance policy.

After all, you are his real bosses, and it's your life and property he is protecting.