

Life as a firearms officer

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Insights into what it's like working as a firearms officer specialising in close protection

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I joined the police service in 2008 and became a firearms officer eight years ago, after completing a 12-week course. These have been by far the best years of my service, which continue to challenge and reward me.

Role and specialism

There are specialisms within firearms, which are full-time roles in some forces. In my force, though, these are taken on as and when required. We predominantly work on the front line in armed response vehicles (ARVs). We respond to incidents involving firearms, of course, as well as edged weapons and other risk factors, which may require a firearms response to ensure a safe resolution.

I personally specialise in close protection, which involves protecting MPs and the Royal Family while carrying firearms, a taser and other police equipment. This is my favourite part of the job. It is so varied, has unique challenges and differs greatly from my day job.

I have worked alongside my Metropolitan Police colleagues and even the Secret Service during the COP26 Summit in Glasgow. I have been fortunate enough to travel all over the country to assist in high-profile jobs, as well as planning events within my force.

To become a close protection officer, I applied and attended an assessment day, which consisted of a number of scenarios, a shoot and an interview. I then attended an intensive five-week course with Police Scotland, which is the best course I have attended to date. I genuinely did not want to leave. I won best student and was the only woman in the group.

My first experience of Edinburgh was driving through the city under a motorbike blue light escort, with people either cheering or jeering at us thinking that we were royalty. It was an experience I'll never forget. To debunk a myth: no, we do not wear fake arms! Yes, we do talk into our suit sleeve.

I am also an operational firearms commander and have commanded numerous firearms incidents and planned operations. This has included a recent visit by His Majesty the King to my force area.

Responsibilities and achievements

Some moments in this role will stay with me forever. On the day of the July 2024 Southport knife attack, I was the operational firearms commander and acting sergeant for my force's ARVs. I still get shivers down my spine remembering when my force incident manager deployed me and my team to the incident to back up Merseyside Firearms.

I have absolute admiration for the patrols, services and members of the public who attended the scene. After being stood down when we were halfway there, we sat in silence. We all contemplated what we could have faced.

After that radio call, it dawned on me how much responsibility lay at my hands if we ever arrived at a scene like that, which fortunately are extremely rare. It would involve commanding a firearms team on the ground, coordinating unarmed patrols, dealing with members of the public and, most importantly, saving lives.

Once the dust has settled, responsibility remains in commanding and forgoing my welfare to ensure the welfare of others and my team first. It's a role that's hard to comprehend, but one that I relish and take great pride in.

My most recent achievements include passing the sergeants' exam and completing the seven-week national firearms instructor course, which was hosted by Greater Manchester Police. This is a long and tiring course – and one that involves a lot of writing, would you believe! But it's one that has certainly opened more doors for me.

Career advice

So, on to the main question: what is life like in firearms?

Summarising this is difficult, as there is so much to talk about, so much to achieve and so many experiences to tell the grandkids.

For those considering a role in firearms, my advice would be to speak to your firearms officers and get to know them. They are a useful source of knowledge and guidance. Within my force, we host familiarisation days, including women's only events. We also conduct scenario training events and ask for volunteers to take part, so I would recommend putting yourself forward.

Finally, I would say get your taser qualification and get experience in risk and threat type incidents that require application of the national decision model.

Common questions

Some of the questions I get asked most often by women who are interested in a role in firearms include the following.

How do you pass the bleep test?

The pass mark is 9.4 for firearms, in comparison to 5.4 for initial police constable entry. The answer to this is simple: it's a running test, so get running!?

Is the kit heavy?

Yes. But it feels just as heavy for the male firearms officers because their vests are bigger. I find distributing my equipment around seems like it lightens the load. Also, do yoga – it really helps your back!

How is it being the only woman on the team?

My honest answer is: I have never been more supported and I have never had as big a sense of belonging as I do in this department, and I have worked on a few different teams in a few different departments over the years.

Firearms departments across the country are facing a great challenge, with recruitment and retention at an all-time low. However, the role remains fulfilling and worthy of the effort, as long as you put in what you want to get out of it.

- This article was peer reviewed by Stephanie Gushlow, Firearms Officer, Metropolitan Police Service

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