

ALL PART OF THE JOB

LIFE ON THE ROAD WITH THE TRAFFIC COPS

Since 2003, BBC1's *Traffic Cops* has consistently topped the ratings for factual programming, pulling in as many as 8 million viewers per episode. Chris Greenwood has been a cameraman on the series from the beginning, but this job involves much more than just shooting the pictures...

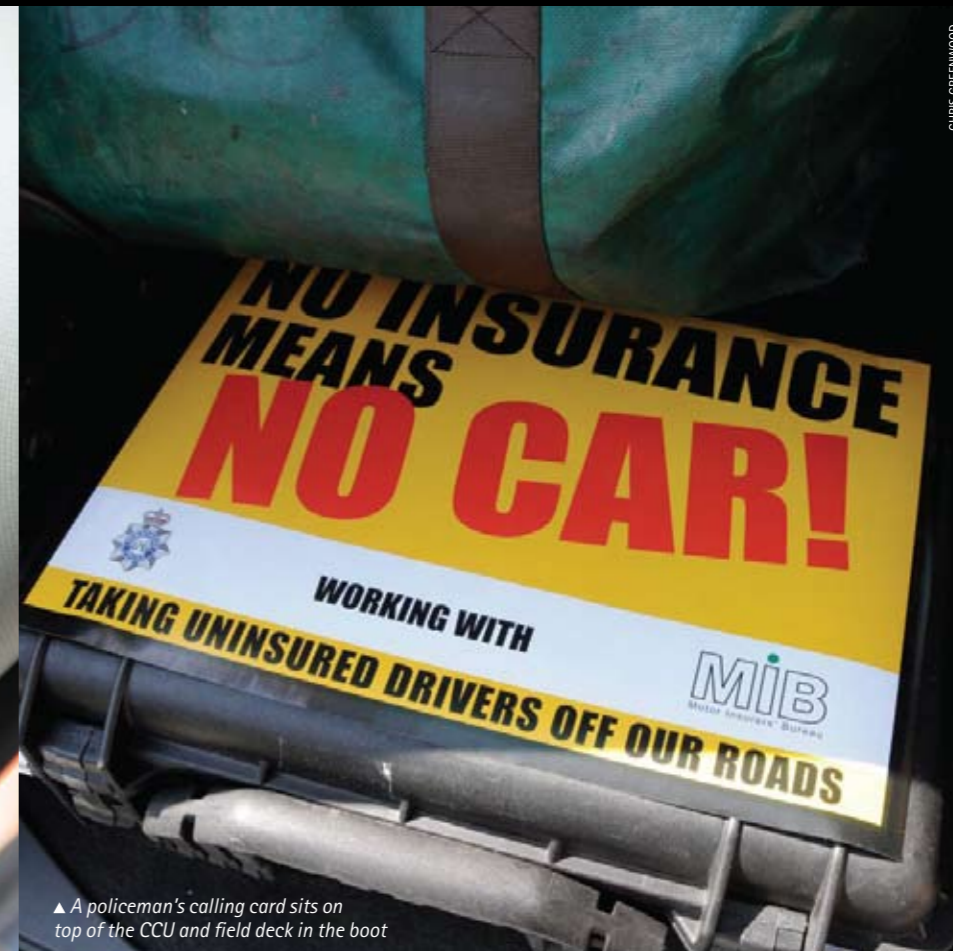
▼ A Humberside Police Traffic Volvo ready to be rigged with cameras



CHRIS GREENWOOD



▲ Toshiba minicams are crucial for catching the initial call coming in



▲ A policeman's calling card sits on top of the CCU and field deck in the boot

CHRIS GREENWOOD

Picture the scene. It's November. Rush hour. It's dark, cold and the rain is coming at you sideways. You're rather wet because your waterproofs don't quite fit, your gloves fell out of your pocket hours ago and you're beginning to sense your left hand turning slightly blue as it rattles against the J11. Welcome to the hard shoulder.

Your eardrums are being assaulted on three fronts. First, the roar of a 40-tonne truck in the left ear via the 416 on top of the camera. In this situation this mic picks up the atmosphere a little too well. Second attack, also the audio of a 40-tonne truck, interspersed with the voice of a policeman trying to comfort a crashed motorist, this blasted into the right ear via a radio mic. So you pump up the monitor pot to try and make out what's occurring. The third sound completely drowns out the other two. It is the actual sound of the 40-tonne truck passing about a metre away, its slipstream tugging at your shoulder, eager to suck you onto the carriageway. Welcome to *Traffic Cops*. It's strangely addictive!

In the dark

The cops will tell you that, statistically, life expectancy here on the edge of the motorway is just 45 minutes. You remain sceptical but nevertheless take note. OK, dodging the Taliban in

Kabul whilst fending off Delhi Belly was definitely worse, and this is not halfway up Everest and you haven't got frostbite. Mind you, making the Himalayas look good is a lot easier than this. Instant beauty all around, just add a .9 grad and you're away. This is an unlit section of the M3 in the middle of nowhere, with no ambient light, just the passing headlights and a 35W PAG to fight the inky blackness. Beauty? An exposure would be nice!

Right, just need to work out what's going on, find the story, the quirky angle and Hoover up some decent video and audio to tell the tale. No second takes. No second chances. No clue what is going on so far due to the cacophony of noise and ludicrous amounts of water splashing around on the virtual dinner plate that is the front of the lens. But the wide angle is needed to shoot inside the police car. Now, what did he just say to that driver...?

It started in Sheffield

Some eight years ago in July 2002, I was shooting for Mentorn when the production manager recommended me to her colleagues at Folio, the specialist company producing 'blue light' shows within the Mentorn stable. Access had been negotiated to

the large traffic department within South Yorkshire Police and Folio needed a cameraman local to the filming base in Sheffield.

I would probably have run a mile. Nevertheless, I do remember feeling slightly nervous as, before I knew it, I was picking up a camera and being

"these shows could not exist without the real human relationships built with both the police and the members of the public"



▲ This jeep deliberately reversed into a pursuing traffic car in Swansea

SOUTH WALES POLICE

On a glorious afternoon, I met up with series director (now executive producer) Bruce Lippold, who briefed me concisely and effectively on what was required to make this kind of television. Detractors may label it 'reality TV' but we prefer to call it 'obs docs'. At that initial meeting, Bruce made it all sound very clear and simple, which I suppose I am glad about now because, if he hadn't,

ushered into the ubiquitous Volvo T5 estate traffic car. It was all down to me... no producer, no director, not even a soundman for comfort!

Camerawork plus

It's hard to believe we've been doing this for ten series now. The required way of working has become second nature... but back then it was all new and even seemed slightly dubious.

The first task was to sit up front in the police car and get to know the big gruff policeman called Jed. He was quite intimidating, but I could see he had a sense of humour because the reg on his personal car began P16 – or pig to those in the know!

In this new, strange way of working, not only did I have to film him but I also had to ask lots of questions and get him to describe what was happening. Plus, I had to interview all the punters encountered. Every incident must be turned into a story with a beginning, middle and end.

And then there was the audio to think about... and the Toshiba minicam, which ran into a clam-shell recorder in a case on the back

seem quite such an issue as they are today. Finally, home at the end of the day, I would write up a 'diary' of the day's events – names, addresses, places – to help the editors find stories and the office to chase the legals.

They say blokes can't multitask but on this job I was to be cameraman, soundman, producer, director and journalist. I didn't actually find the edit suite I suspected might be hidden away in the boot... but I knew for sure I was responsible for everything else!

Fortunately, policeman Jed turned out to be a trooper, the sun shone all that first day and we bagged a whole load of stories. Soon, I was beginning to have fun. The job was essentially the same as many others – shoot

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seat and needed a fresh tape every hour ... and POV footage to consider too. In those days, we used just to copy the police POV footage and the main consideration was making sure they kept it running and fed with tapes. These days, we have our own POV camera and this has meant an additional hour transferring to hard drive at the end of every day. At the moment, we are still shooting on DVCAM, but if and when these shows go HD, then I guess we'll be downloading lots of P2 cards to hard drive each night.

Then there were release forms to think about (no, really!) although back in those days consent forms didn't

everything that moves – but with a few extra things to worry about. Most important, forget trying to be a neat cameraman who buttons on/buttons off for every shot. Just keep rolling for the audio because the story is everything.

How we do it

Since those first days finding my feet, I have spent significant chunks of my working life sat in the back of a police car, whizzing around at 100mph (and then some – which is entertaining). Each year, Bruce, producer Simon Meehan and the five regular 'Camera Johnnys' convene at a traffic police base for eight weeks' filming. So far

we have been to South Yorkshire, Cheshire, Hampshire, Humberside, South Wales and Sussex and it's off to Bedfordshire next.

The DSR450 is still the current weapon of choice. Mine has taken a battering over the years as filming patrol car interiors while taking speed bumps at 70mph brings various parts of the rig into frequent contact with the car roof. This can prove quite expensive. Fortunately, the Doctor, Pete at Hammerhead in Manchester, can usually bring the gear back to life. Hammerhead Manchester provides much of the gear and, in my opinion, their level of service outstrips most London operations.

The patrol cars are rigged with Toshiba SD minicams which record to DSR50 DVCAM field decks in the boot. The CCU and decks are housed in a Pelicase customised by ourselves and Hammerhead, designed to be rugged yet accessible. Forward-facing HD POV cameras record onto flash memory, there is some discreet(ish) lighting for night shifts, and there are two channels of audio. One way and another, there's a lot of cable to hide.

After the shoot, Simon and Bruce return to London to hammer six 1-hour programmes into shape with editor Naudene Leisegang. During the winter we dust off the DigiBeta and I am lucky enough to return to the cop shop with Simon to light the retrospective sit-down interviews. For series one, lighting cameraman Mark Parkin shot all the sync interviews in front of a carefully arranged backdrop of nicely lit police cars in the South Yorkshire Police hangar. Today, we do it all bluescreen so we can squeeze into whichever cupboard or outhouse we are provided with as a location!

These days my address book is full of police mobile numbers and my inbox receives all the latest police

gags doing the internet rounds. Along the way, we've been in all sorts of scrapes. We've stopped speeders and fraudsters and been to accidents a-plenty. We've been in high-speed pursuits and waited for hours in laybys for that 'big job' that usually never happens. We've been to stabbings and attempted murders, seized drugs and discovered loaded guns. We've witnessed the touching, the painful, the hilarious and the downright bizarre... been threatened, spat at, mooned at, flashed at, swung for and verbally abused time and again. Ironically, in a job which friends and family view as being exciting and somehow desirable, we are regularly sneered at by the drunk and drugged-up youth of Britain's town centres for being 'saddo's', somehow inadequate because we have to work on a Friday night when we should be out on the lash. I've even been mocked by a 16-year-old drunk driver in handcuffs just for having what I consider a good job! It's all in a night's work. Anyway, back to that soaking night on the M3...

Trust

The secret to getting good stories, I've learnt, is building up relationships with these guys and girls, putting them at ease so they'll be relaxed on camera. At the same time, it's important always to question what is going on. Neither you nor the show will be credible if perceived as police propaganda. Coppers like to be in control so they have to be persuaded to take the rough with the smooth. Usually the cop in the seat beside you doesn't mind putting him/herself out if you've made the effort to get to know them and they know you're OK. If you've spent the last four nights shadowing their 12-hour shifts, working hard to build up a rapport and earn their trust, you become a team



▲ Cameraman Chris Greenwood on location in Hull

and it's a good feeling. After all, you can't do your job without them ...

But right now you want to curse the guy. Why on earth did he respond to this mundane call that you know will never make the cut? You've been to hundreds of minor bumps like this and nothing ever happens. And the worst of it is, you know he's cursing you too. If it wasn't for Johnny Cameraman he

seriously bad for your waistline (hence the ill-fitting waterproofs). Lunch or 'refs' in police parlance can be taken at any hour of the day or night whenever the work allows. 'Refs' is the number one topic of police conversation if things have 'gone wrong' on the motorway (that's a serious crash resulting in a fatality to you and me). It can easily be 3am

than a human being – sat on the shelf until needed and then forgotten about afterwards. But these shows could not exist without the real human relationships built with both the police and the public.

All the lads on *Traffic Cops* are experienced cameramen but we are actually credited as camera/directors because there's no agreed term for what we do on this show... just an acknowledgement that it's different. I'm not certain if there is widespread appreciation within the industry of what is required on location for jobs like these. Given the variety of skills needed and the number of elements involved, could it be argued that 'film-maker' would be a more appropriate moniker giving equal weight to all the skills required? As budgets continually reduce, technology carries on evolving, and crews get ever smaller, is this the road the industry will lead us down? Will we all become 'film-makers'? Or will 'cameramen' just have a lot more responsibilities than before? Who decides? And will we have our say? Have camera people ever been given the recognition they deserve?

I'm not sure now which way of working I prefer. On the one hand, it is liberating creatively to have a director and soundman to take the pressure off, to allow you to concentrate purely on aesthetics and technical quality, especially in HD. But then again, the editorial responsibility of finding the story and making it your own can be very exhilarating. Mainly, I hope that in these changing times we can sustain an industry in Britain where we have the chance to do both. After all, one of the greatest attractions of our job is the variety.

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could have left this one for someone else to deal with. It's the end of the shift, let the early turn deal with it...

The motorist doesn't want to be filmed and for the umpteenth time you're told you're not allowed to do this and you're infringing human rights etc etc. Passing motorists spot the camera and think it's hilarious to honk really loudly. A gust of wind catches your man's white traffic cop hat and he scuttles after it as it bounces down the road. Traffic men are very proud of their white peaked caps and he throws you a smile through gritted teeth. He knows he's been framed and the editors love a bit of slapstick. Perhaps it was worth getting wet after all!

Fortunately, there will be no hard feelings. You're with the cops now and every day ends the same – back at the station with plenty of banter, a big mug of tea and a biscuit, or a take-away, but definitely not doughnuts. Apparently cops only eat doughnuts in the movies. I've been told to tell you that... and they know where I live.

The truth is that this series is

before you get to eat having not had anything since lunchtime the previous day. This is your first clue as to why cameramen and the boys in blue find it easy to get on. We are all familiar with cruising the streets late at night desperately seeking an open kebab shop or 24-hour garage. And it's over 'refs', sat with the rest of the shift around a rickety table in a run-down old police station, that you find out that he deliberately stopped every car he could all day, just to make you get out and get wet. He thinks that's hilarious – but then again so do his colleagues when you tell them about him chasing his hat down the hard shoulder. And you know that'll make the cut so you win that one!

Job description

It really is the human relationships which make the appeal of this job enduring. Good people skills are as crucial as good camera skills. In the freelance world we often feel that, as camera-people, we are treated like a piece of kit (say it carefully) rather

Kit list

- DSR450/DigiBeta/J11/J17
- 416 microphone
- 2x Sony UWP2 radio mics
- Toshiba 3CCD minicams/DSR50
- Panasonic AVCHD camcorders
- Rosco LitePads

Fact File

A proud Lancastrian, freelance lighting cameraman Chris Greenwood is based in exile in South Yorkshire. After graduating from the Northern Media School, he learnt his trade camera assisting on documentaries and clapper/loading on feature films and TV drama. Chris and fellow lighting cameraman Mark Parkin co-ordinate their shooting activities through CanCam Ltd providing cameras and crews for documentary work as well as full production capability for the corporate sector.

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Traffic Cops credits
Folio Productions
Exec Producer: Bruce Lippold
Producer: Simon Meehan
Production Manager: Christina Lohmann
Camera/Director: Chris Greenwood
Kit via John Dardis at Hammerhead Manchester

▼ Chris rigging Toshiba camera head

▼ Producer Simon Meehan rigging the POV camera

