A Police Officer and a Gentleman

By CLIVE EMSLEY

It is fairly common for the ordinary reader to assume that we know just about all there is to know about the history of the Police and the history of the Second World War. Yet there are very significant parts of both that are almost entirely unknown. Surprisingly, as far as Police history is concerned, there is no significant history of Lord Trenchard's training college for future police leaders opened in 1934.

On the Second World War, as detailed in the previous article I completed a book on police officers who, during the Second World War, continued to fulfil policing roles but as soldiers, either investigating crimes committed by soldiers or attempting to restore civil society to countries once occupied by enemy forces and then, ultimately to the enemy countries themselves. The former of these groups still exists as S.I.B. (the Special Investigations Branch) of the Military Police. Civil Affairs, as the other group was broadly known, is scarcely even a memory.

It was during this earlier research that I kept coming across Albert Frederick Wilcox – he was not keen on those Christian names and to his friends, his wife and his children he was known as 'Michael' or 'Mike.' I also had the fortune to find that he had been a great collector, especially of his wartime papers, and with great generosity, his children kindly loaned them to me.

Michael Wilcox is not now well-known but he had a very distinguished police career. Forced to leave school because his mother believed that, following the death of his father, she had insufficient money to keep him and his siblings there, he began life as a factory clerk.

Yet Michael wanted a more exciting life and, as soon as he was able, he joined the City of Bristol Police. At 6 feet 4 inches he looked the part; unfortunately his superiors recognised his ability to organise and get things done, consequently, as a police constable in his native Bristol, he never made an arrest and rarely left the force headquarters. Though his education had been cut short, he was not deterred from applying to Trenchard's new Police College established in Hendon in 1934. His success in the entrance exam, when he was up against men from schools such as Eton, some who had university degrees, required him to transfer to the Metropolitan Police.

In 1943, by then an Inspector with a wife and two very small daughters, he volunteered for the Civil Affairs unit of the Allied Armies.

He landed at Salerno during the fierce fighting on the beaches and set about 'liberating' towns in southern Italy. This was a role that he seems thoroughly to have enjoyed; he made his own decisions and with a G.I. for a driver – a man who had got the job because of his Italian ancestry, but who seems to have been good enough to order a pizza or a panini, but had little real grasp of the language – he drove across difficult, sometimes dangerous country, telling the locals that there was now an Allied Military Government. He was rapidly promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and found himself doing the lion's share of the work in attempting to reorganise the Italian Police.

Wilcox (seated, second right) with his fellow British Public Safety Officers, Vienna, May 1946

At the end of the war he failed to get immediate demobilisation and opted to join the Public Safety Officers bound for Austria which, like Germany, was divided into four zones – American, British, French and Soviet. As the principal British PSO in Vienna he found himself in regular confrontations with his Soviet equivalents; he was also the most interested of the senior police officers in all four zones in the recreation of a police force for Vienna.

Post-war Vienna was the city of Graham Greene's novella and, more famously, carol Reed's film *The Third Man*. When Wilcox arrived it was both violent and a centre for the black market. Wilcox intensely disliked and suspected the continuation of political involvement with the police, but as the economy gradually improved so his new, well-trained Viennese police managed to get a grip on crime and the general breach of regulations.

He watched colleagues leave the armed forces to take up senior police positions elsewhere; many of these men he knew through Hendon and shared wartime experience. He wrote home to Ethel, his wife who had had hardly seen in three years, saying that he would relish something like the rank of chief constable to look after her and his daughters.

He applied for several such posts and in late 1946 he was appointed Deputy Chief Constable of Buckinghamshire. After six months he was encouraged to apply for the vacancy of Chief Constable of Hertfordshire. Though not someone who shone in interviews he got the job, and served in Herts for the next 22 years, until his retirement in 1969.

Several of his friends and fellow graduates from Hendon moved on to senior posts in the Metropolitan Police and the Inspectorate of Constabulary. It seems that Wilcox may have been eyed for being transferred to the Met on a couple of occasions, but he had no desire to move on from Herts and relished the challenges of command, of the new motorway system and new technology.

AF 'Michael' Wilcox as Chief Constable of Hertfordshire Constabulary

On retirement he enjoyed a link with the new Criminology Institute at Cambridge, publishing a small book on prosecution which is still well regarded; and he developed a variety of academic links. He also took on a variety of temporary posts for the Home Office.

Wilcox was clearly a very able police officer and leader. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it had been common for military men to command county police and the forces belonging to the bigger cities. In the aftermath of the Second World War there were, once again, men with significant military rank acting as chief constables, but like Wilcox, they had enlisted in the police, several had attended the course at Hendon, and their military rank had been acquired through war service.

Some of these men were from monied backgrounds and had gone to the 'right' schools and even to university; and one or two of them were keen to press their social superiority. Wilcox, in contrast, had no such feelings of superiority. He was man who was not inclined to push himself forward; family was as important to him as the job. Nevertheless, he rose through the ranks by demonstrating his ability and a strong commitment to his role. As Chief Constable he appears to have been popular and respected by those who served under him; while he, in turn, made their welfare a key consideration.

"A Police Officer and A Gentleman: A.F. 'Michael' Wilcox" by Clive Emsley (Blue Lamp Books, 2018) is available from Amazon.

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For ten years he was President of the International Association for the History of Crime and Criminal Justice hosted by the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris, and he was a research associate of the Australian Centre of Excellence in Policing and Security. He has published and broadcast widely on the history of crime and policing.

His *Crime and Society in England, 1750-1900* was first published in 1987 and has recently appeared in its fifth edition. His most recent research has focussed on crime and policing in wartime, notably *Soldier, Sailor, Beggarman, Thief: Crime and the British Armed Services since 1914* and *Exporting British Policing During the Second World War*.