

Britain: Why did the police man-hunt of Raoul Moat end in death?

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The inquest held July 13 into the death of Raoul Moat, who shot himself after a six-hour standoff with police, heard that he was also shot by two officers with Taser guns. The coroner, David Mitford, said the cause of death was a gunshot wound to the head. He adjourned the inquest until a later date.

Moat, a 37-year-old former nightclub bouncer, had been hunted by police for a week following three shootings. The man-hunt—the largest of its kind in Britain—began after Moat injured his former girlfriend and killed her new boyfriend in Birtley, Gateshead July 3. Within 24 hours, it was reported in the media that Moat had declared “war” on the police and shot and injured PC David Rathband, who was sitting in his patrol car in East Denton, Newcastle.

Moat had been arrested 12 times since 2000, charged on seven occasions but convicted only once. He already felt persecuted by police as he served his brief recent jail sentence. He apparently also resented not being able to see his three young children. While in prison, his girlfriend informed him that their relationship was over. To dissuade Moat, she told him that her new partner was a policeman. One of Moat’s first acts on release from prison July 1 was to post on his Facebook page, “I’ve lost everything, my business, my property and to top it all off my lass of six years has gone off with the copper that sent me down.”

The *Independent* newspaper reported, “When he was stewing during his last days in jail, he made it sufficiently clear that revenge was in his mind for the prison to send, on Friday 2 July, a warning to Northumbria police that Moat may attempt to harm his former partner.”

Yet no action was taken by the force.

Shortly after the shootings, Moat visited a friend and handed him a 49-page handwritten confession for the police that sought to tell the media his side of the story. Moat stated that the general public need not fear him, and that his argument was with the police.

Over the course of seven days, while the police concentrated almost a tenth of its national fire-power in and around the small village of Rothbury in Northumbria, the media created a hysterical atmosphere complete with round-the-clock coverage of the man-hunt and lurid details of Moat’s imploding life.

Northumbria’s temporary chief constable, Sue Sim, became

the public face of the police hunt around the besieged village. Sim’s slowly enunciated press conferences sought to allay public fears that were only heightened by the siege conditions created by her own officers, joined by hundreds of others from 15 other regional police forces.

Sim has previously gone on record over her opposition to the current relationship between the police and the media. In her national role with the Association of Chief Police Officers, she holds the national portfolio for public order. After the death of newspaper vendor Ian Tomlinson at the G20 protests in London in 2009 led to widespread criticism of police tactics in relation to protesters, Sim attacked the media coverage as having been “one-sided” and refused to condemn individual officers or the controversial “kettling” tactic.

It is clear that a more sensible approach could have been and should have been followed towards Moat—including offers to facilitate his peaceful surrender. Moat’s family have criticised police for refusing several offers to help “talk down” the fugitive during the final six-hour standoff with police which ended in his death. His brother said police had declined his offer to help, while their uncle also asked police to be allowed to go to the cordon to aid negotiations as police in Rothbury surrounded Moat.

Angus Moat, from Gateshead, said his brother had died in a “public execution” after officers from West Yorkshire are believed to have fired two Tasers at him moments before he shot himself. During the standoff, witnesses clearly heard Moat telling officers that: “I have not got a dad—no one cares about me,” a reference to the fact he never knew his father.

Moat’s uncle, Charlie Alexander, said, “I’m the closest thing he’s got to a father. I rang the police at 11 o’clock last night [three-and-a-half hours into the standoff] to ask them to take me to him as I knew I could make a difference. It was family he needed.”

He added: “If I went up, and he would have somebody that loves him...it would possibly have turned him that little bit that he needed [to give himself up].”

The requests by both men were refused by the police.

No doubt the police response was in part influenced by the events in Cumbria last month when taxi-driver, Derrick Bird, shot dead 12 people before killing himself. But it is also certain

that the scale and character of the police man-hunt was ignited when “one of their own” was shot and by Moat’s public declarations against the police.

It is certainly the case that in the hunt for Raoul Moat, unstable and homicidal tendencies were expressed by the hunters rather than the hunted—with reports of police vehicles colliding as officers “high” on the chase rushed around Rothbury to take part in the sickening spectacle of police gloating over Moat’s death.

Writing in the *Guardian*, the former prisoner Erwin James pointed out that “the industrial scale of the operation mounted by the police in their search for Moat—reinforcements from 15 different forces, a mass of hi-tech firepower, armoured vehicles from Northern Ireland, assistance from the army and a Tornado jet kindly lent by the RAF—was matched only by the magnitude of its failure. After eight days on the run—most of which Moat evidently spent lurking in gardens, sleeping in spare rooms and strolling up the high street in Rothbury, the epicentre of the search area—and six hours of negotiations and a good Taser, the cornered man shot himself. As he lay dying the police jumped on him screaming like banshees.”

This was truly vengeance, rather than justice or even effective policing.

James notes that “Had he been convicted, Moat would have received the harshest penalty under current sentencing guidelines. Political considerations would probably have ensured that he was handed a ‘whole life’ tariff. At the very least he would have got a minimum of 35 years, making him 72 before he could apply for parole... ‘rehabilitation’—reintegration into a meaningful contributing life in the outside world—would never have been an option. He may indeed have had a future, but not one that anyone would have wished for. Raoul Moat was undoubtedly in a seriously disturbed mental state at the end, but he was rational enough to understand that.”

The media must also be held responsible for their part in events. Moat was reported to be following some of the press reports while on the run and was becoming increasingly angry at inaccuracies and manipulations about him that he believed had the hand of the police behind them. The press in any case played a malicious, irresponsible and—potentially—far more deadly role in creating a hysterical climate within which the police acted.

An inquiry has commenced by the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) into the conclusion to the police man-hunt of Moat. It is expected to consider the offers of help from the family as part of its investigation and will also look at the use of Tasers by the police, prompted by suspicions that use of the stun guns may have induced a muscle spasm which caused Moat to pull the trigger as he held the shotgun to his head.

The Tasers used on Moat may not have yet been officially approved for police use. The Taser XRep is deployed from a 12-gauge shotgun with a range of 100 feet. It can incapacitate a

person for 20 seconds by firing 50,000-volt darts; much longer than a regular stun gun. The Home Office confirmed the Taser was subject to testing by its scientific development branch. “However,” it added, “legally, police forces have discretion to use any equipment they see fit as long as the use of force is lawful, reasonable and proportionate.”

Despite controversy since their introduction in Britain in 2003, Northumbria police have resorted to Taser use more frequently than any other force in the country. The predominantly rural force reported more incidents involving stun guns than the Metropolitan police in London, which cover a population more than five times larger.

Moat’s family said the official post-mortem into his death made no mention of the stun guns and said they were considering asking for a second independent examination.

The IPCC—despite its name, an official police body—is also looking at the failure of Northumbria police to act on information from Durham prison that Moat was a possible danger to his former partner. Investigators will also be looking at the account of a Rothbury resident who described how police officers had crowded around Moat in the moments before he shot himself.

However, in a foreshadowing of an inevitable white-wash, an IPCC spokesman said it would not be looking at how the man-hunt for Moat was conducted. It could be up to a year before the IPCC publishes its findings.

Raoul Moat was clearly a troubled and ultimately tragic figure who should have received the help that he himself had sought from social services before his prison term. It is possible that, given the appropriate help and without the escalating tensions introduced by the police and the media, there would have been a different outcome. Moat may have been prevented from taking violent action and possibly even picked up his shattered life and been re-united with his children.

In the wake of his death, significant numbers of people have sought to portray Moat as some kind of fugitive anti-hero—to be looked up to for his targeting of the police. Prime Minister, David Cameron, expressed some of the nervousness of the political elite at such a phenomena by ordering Downing Street officials to contact Facebook “to lodge a formal protest” at the fact that 30,000 people had joined a tribute page to Moat.

Such sentiment may express the growth of an inchoate mistrust and even hatred of the police. But it is at best a misguided sentiment. Moat’s horrible fate deserves serious reflection, certainly not admiration.



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