

British police kill unarmed man with Taser

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24 August 2011

On August 16, officers from Cumbria Police responded to reports that a man was causing a disturbance at an address in Barrow-in-Furness.

At around 18:30, eight officers arrived at the second floor flat of Dale Burns, 27, the father of two young children, and sought to arrest him. During the arrest one officer discharged a Taser device a number of times and another officer deployed pepper spray.

Burns complained of feeling unwell following the arrest and was taken to Furness General Hospital where his condition deteriorated. At around 21:00, he was pronounced dead.

The incident has been referred to the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), a toothless self-regulating police body notorious for its routine inaction.

A post-mortem failed to establish a cause of death. Dales' girlfriend was described as being in "total shock." In the days following the killing, tributes to Dale flowed in.

Stan Dewhurst is the manager of the Flex Appeal gym, where Dale trained as a bodybuilder. He competed in regional and national competitions. "I have known him since he started coming to the gym aged about 15 or 16," he said. "Despite the age gap we were very close and when his daughter Honor was born he asked to me to be her godfather." Stan added, "Dale was definitely not a violent person."

A friend, who preferred anonymity, said, "I don't know what kicked off the trouble but when the police got to him they couldn't control him so they Tasered him. But he got back up and was going off his head because he was angry at what they had done, so they Tasered him twice more.

"They got him up to the hospital and his body went into shock. They brought him back to life with the shockers but then he just went flatline."

"The police went overboard with the Taser", he added. "They didn't need to Taser him three times."

Following Burns's death, Amnesty International, which has previously called for a moratorium on Taser usage, expressed concerns about their wider deployment. They noted that in the United States, where Taser guns have been widely used by police since 2001, at least 450 recorded

deaths have occurred in connection with Tasers. In many instances victims were unarmed and did not appear to present a serious threat when they were shocked, in some cases several times.

The use of Tasers is expanding across Britain. On August 3, police in Nottinghamshire were compelled to apologise for accidentally shooting a 14-year-old girl with a Taser. Officers were called to an address following reports of anti-social behaviour in the area. Police discharged the Taser after trying to arrest a man who had reportedly become aggressive. The Taser shot hit Jodie Gallagher, who was standing nearby.

Nottinghamshire Police referred the incident to the IPCC. Last year, the IPCC completely exonerated Nottinghamshire Police for an incident in June 2009 in which several of its officers subdued a man in the city centre while one used a Taser on him three times and another officer appeared to repeatedly punch the victim in the neck and head area. A taxi driver filmed the incident as a large and hostile crowd of youth formed around the police in evident concern at their actions.

The victim's solicitor, Susie Gregson Murray, said at the time that she was very surprised there was no criticism of the way the police used the Taser. She added that it sent out the wrong message to the police, "and will only encourage them to use the Taser in an aggressive manner."

In July 2005, just months after the Taser was adopted by British Police, Nicholas Gaubert was taking a bus in Leeds on his way to meet friends when he suffered a fit and slipped into a coma, which left him slumped on his seat clutching his rucksack. Armed police were called to the bus depot and when he failed to respond to their challenges he was shot with a Taser.

Gaubert said as this was happening another officer was pointing a gun at his head. He was restrained and eventually came round in the police van. He said it was only then that the officers realised it was a medical emergency, despite him wearing a medical tag round his neck to warn of his condition, and took him to hospital.

Gaubert said he was told the police believed he looked "Egyptian." The sinister import of this became apparent one

week later, when the young Brazilian-born electrician, Jean Charles de Menezes, was gunned down and killed by the Metropolitan police at Stockwell tube station in London.

Gaubert's solicitor, Ifti Manzoor, said the incident had clear parallels with the shooting of de Menezes. Gaubert himself said, "When I heard about that Brazilian man in London I just thought, 'Oh no, that could have been me'."

West Yorkshire Police of course placed the matter in the hands of the IPCC. Gaubert said he had decided to speak out after the Crown Prosecution Service ruled no officers involved should be charged with any criminal offences. He continues to suffer severe post-traumatic stress as a result of the shooting.

Although the death of Dale Burns is officially recorded as the first at the hands of British police on using the Taser weapon, at least two other cases bear consideration.

In 2006, 47-year-old Brian Loan died several days after being shot with a Taser in County Durham. A coroner attributed his death to heart disease.

In July 2010, the weeklong manhunt of troubled fugitive Raul Moat ended with his apparent suicide. At the end of a six-hour standoff, officers from West Yorkshire Police are believed to have fired two Tasers at Moat, possibly resulting in a muscle spasm causing him to involuntarily pull the trigger of the shotgun pointing at his head.

Angus Moat said his brother had died in a "public execution." Any mention of the use of the Taser was expunged from the official post-mortem into Moats' death.

The Taser used on Moat was a controversially more lethal type not as yet officially approved for police use. The "super Taser" XRep is deployed from a 12-gauge shotgun with a range of 100 feet. The Home Office confirmed the Taser was subject to testing by its scientific development branch. "However", it added at the time, "legally, police forces have discretion to use any equipment they see fit as long as the use of force is lawful, reasonable and proportionate."

The XRep is currently being evaluated by the Home Office for use by British police forces.

In April 2008, the BBC ran a TV program called "Traffic Cops" which showed police surprising a pedestrian by shooting him with a Taser without warning, before arresting him on suspicion of theft. The suspect had no weapon and was talking with a bystander and posed no threat. The suspect was later found to be innocent of any crime.

Since their introduction in 2003, Tasers have been used in around 6,000 incidents by British police. Initially only firearms officers were stipulated to use them in "exceptional circumstances". In September 2007, non-firearms officers were given authorisation to carry Tasers on 10 forces. Following a trial, the Home Secretary agreed to allow chief police officers of all 43 police forces in England and Wales

to use Tasers, from December 2008.

A fund for up to 10,000 additional Tasers is being made available for individual chief police officers across the UK to "bid" for Tasers based on their own operational requirements.

The Taser delivers a 50,000-volt electric charge through two dart-like electrodes that remain attached to the gun by 21 feet-long insulated wires, enabling the handler to administer repeat shocks. The victim experiences neuromuscular incapacitation—the disruption of brain control over the muscles of the body.

Analysts have argued that Tasers and other high-voltage stun devices lead to several potentially lethal consequences, such as cardiac arrhythmia in susceptible cases, resulting in possible heart attacks or death by ventricular fibrillation leading to cardiac arrest. People susceptible can often appear healthy and unaware that they are at risk.

The United Nations Committee Against Torture (UNCAT), charged with overseeing the application of the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, ruled in November 2007 that the use of the electric pulse Taser gun constitutes a "form of torture" and "can even provoke death."

The UN declared that "TASER electronic stun guns are a form of torture that can kill."

The arming of the British police has assumed grave and immediate significance in the light of the recent police killing of Mark Duggan and the police response to the youth riots across the country this provoked. The police and the other state law enforcement agencies are preparing to meet a growing movement in the working class and the youth to historic levels of social inequality, with lethal force.



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