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Ineffective use of a life hammer

A van being pursued by police collides with a vehicle, leading to the death of two people, raising issues about:

- *Guidance and training on the use of life hammers*
- *Suitable equipment for breaking laminated windows*

This case is relevant to the following areas:



Overview of incident

Shortly after midnight, PC A and PC B were in a marked police vehicle when they stopped at a set of red traffic lights. PC A was driving and had valid, level one advanced tactical pursuit and containment (TPAC) driver training.

PC A said he became aware of a white van which had stopped very near to his vehicle, virtually on the carriageway markings dividing the lanes. PC A said he could not see any obstruction or other reason for the van to stop so close.

When the traffic lights turned green, the van pulled off first followed by the police vehicle. PC A said he waited for the van to pass with the intention of stopping it to speak with the driver. The van drove slowly and pulled into a residential estate, followed by PC A and PC B. PC B activated his Body Worn Video (BWV). PC A activated the police vehicle's lights and sirens to get the van driver's attention and request the van to stop. The sirens were turned off after a short blast but the lights remained on.

For the next 40 seconds the van driver continued driving into the estate at low speed, using the indicators to turn left and right. Both PC A and PC B said they did not believe the van was failing to stop due to the low speed it was travelling at and the limited places to pull over and park on the estate.

The van suddenly accelerated away as the vehicles approached the end of the estate. The van ended up on the wrong side of the carriageway before immediately pulling back onto the correct side. PC A said he believed the driver of the van was now failing to stop and re-activated the sirens upon leaving the estate.

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As soon as the van started speeding away, PC B took hold of the in-car radio and tried to find their location using the map function on the in-car terminal. The van driver continued to drive at speed away from the police, failing to slow down while crossing a roundabout. The police vehicle was travelling at a maximum speed of 70mph. The speed limit on this road was 30mph.

PC A and PC B momentarily lost sight of the van due to a bend in the road. PC B said he heard a loud bang, as they drove round this bend.

The van could be seen in the distance as they exited the bend. It had collided with something and was travelling backwards. It mounted the pavement and came to a stop on a grass verge. It was not possible to see what the van had collided with.

PC A and PC B arrived at the scene and PC A turned the sirens off.

Analysis of the Incident Data Recorder (IDR) and journey data from the police vehicle concluded it was approximately 31 seconds from PC A activating the sirens as the van accelerated away from him, to the police vehicle coming to a stop.

Upon arrival, PC B exited the police vehicle and ran over to the van, opened the driver's door and told the driver, Mr C, to get out. PC B took Mr C from the van and placed him on the ground where he restrained him. PC A took over the restraint and arrested Mr C. PC A remained with Mr C by the van until more officers arrived.

PC B used his personal police radio to contact the control room. He told the operator they had been in a pursuit and there had been a crash. He requested the attendance of further officers and an ambulance for the driver of the van. PC B said the crash had probably occurred at 50-60mph.

PC B reported the van had collided with a couple of other parked vehicles.

PC B walked into the road and his BWV captured a dark coloured vehicle on the far side. The vehicle appeared to have collided with a silver vehicle parked in front of it. Smoke could be seen coming from the vehicle. PC B said he believed this dark coloured vehicle was a parked car. No lights were visible in/on either of the vehicles.

A man stood on the road, Mr D, near to the dark vehicle waved his arms to get the officer's attention. Mr D told PC B there were people in the dark coloured vehicle. Police later identified the two occupants of this car as Mr E and Mrs F.

A collision investigator stated the dark coloured vehicle had been travelling in the correct lane in the opposite direction to the van. As Mr C had tried to round a bend, he entered the lane of the dark coloured vehicle and collided with it. The impact caused the dark coloured vehicle to spin onto the other side of the road. It ended up in front of the silver vehicle and looked as if it was parked.

PC B and Mr D tried to open all of the doors on the car without success. PC B told the control room there was another vehicle involved with possibly two people trapped. He requested the fire brigade and another ambulance.

A few seconds later, PC A shouted for PC B to get the hammer from the police vehicle. PC B retrieved the small red life hammer from the police vehicle before running back to the dark

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coloured vehicle with Mr E and Mrs F trapped inside. A life hammer is an emergency tool with a double sided hammerhead. It is stored within vehicles and designed for breaking vehicle glass.

Around this time, Mr G, an emergency medical technician (EMT) told the IOPC he happened to be passing in a patient transport vehicle with his colleague Ms H. He stopped to provide assistance.

PC B used the life hammer to strike the bottom left corner of the driver's window 12 times in quick succession but the window did not break. PC B struck the same window in the bottom right hand corner a further nine times but the window still did not break. He turned the hammer round to try the point on each side but the window still did not break.

PC B took his baton and used it to strike the window. The window shattered on the third attempt. PC B opened the driver door and spoke to Mr E. He said hello and asked if Mr E could hear him. He did not get a response. He also spoke to Mrs F several times and did get a response. He continued unsuccessfully to get a response from Mr E.

PC B asked the EMT to have a look at Mr E because he was not talking at all. Mr G carried out an assessment of Mr E while PC B tried again to open the door on Mrs F's side. PC B also used his baton to strike the window on Mrs F's side but it did not shatter. Mr G told PC B that Mr E did not have a pulse. PC B requested an ambulance again.

Mr D managed to shatter the glass in the rear passenger side of the car. Mr D and PC B opened the door before PC B spoke to Mrs F to ask if she was alright.

Mr G asked PC B for help getting Mr E out of the car. Between them, Mr D, Mr G and PC B pulled Mr E out of the car and laid him on the ground. Mr G and Ms H commenced CPR. Another officer, PC I, arrived at the scene with a defibrillator and helped Mr G and Ms H with first aid until the fire brigade and ambulance service arrived.

PC B went back to Mrs F's car to try and open it again. PC J and PC K arrived at the vehicle to help. PC B and PC K discussed the need to support Mrs F's head while waiting for the fire brigade. PC J supported Mrs F's head.

The first fire engine arrived around 10 minutes later and the first ambulance arrived a few minutes after that. The paramedics took control of the first aid, assisted by the fire brigade and EMTs.

Around 30 minutes later, both Mr E and Mrs F were pronounced dead at the scene. Cause of death was later identified as chest injuries as a result of the collision.

Type of investigation

IOPC independent investigation.

Findings and recommendations

Finding 1

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1. The apparent ineffectiveness of the life hammer contributed to the time taken to access the vehicle. Evidence suggests the tool was used correctly despite no guidance or training being available to officers on its use. There also appeared to be no regulation on issuing life hammers or any reporting or replacement process following their use. The life hammer manufacturer advised the IOPC they are designed for use ideally on one occasion only.

National recommendation 1

2. The IOPC recommends that the National Police Chiefs' Council shares the learning from this investigation with relevant force leads, asking them to ensure that if any of their fleet vehicles contain life hammers: their officers understand how and where on a vehicle life hammers should be used, and where alternative methods may be more effective they have a system for making sure that life hammers are replaced where necessary where possible any future procurement exercises obtain equipment that officers can use to break all types of vehicle windows, including laminated windows. This follows a case where an officer tried to use a life hammer to break the window of a car that had been involved in a collision, so that he could help the occupants who were trapped inside. He was unable to break the window using the life hammer and had to resort to using his baton. He was able to get the driver out of the car but could not get the front seat passenger out. The two occupants of the vehicle died at the scene of the collision. Our investigation found that the officer had received no training or guidance on the optimum place to strike the glass. It also found that there was no system for monitoring the use of life hammers despite the fact the tool becomes blunt with use and would require replacement, and that the hammer is not effective when used on laminated windows.

Local recommendations

Local recommendation 1

3. The IOPC recommends that the force ensures that: its officers understand how and where on a vehicle life hammers should be used, and where alternative methods may be more effective. It has a system for making sure that life hammers are replaced where necessary. Where possible any future procurement exercises obtain equipment that officers can use to break all types of vehicle windows, including laminated windows.

Response to the recommendations

National recommendations

National recommendation 1

1. The recommendation was accepted in full. A letter was circulated to all chief constables outlining the concerns raised by this investigation, and encouraging them to note the IOPC recommendations made to the force.

Local recommendations

Local recommendation 1

2. The force agreed to include information about the use of the life hammer and a video recording of the equipment in use in all driver training courses. The force also communicated to officers the current in-vehicle was provided only as safety equipment to be used as an escape tool to exit a vehicle. It also communicated the process to be used for requesting a replacement and the local fire and rescue service has specialist equipment to rescue people from a vehicle in an emergency situation. The force is carrying out a review of equipment which may be suitable for breaking laminated glass windscreens.

Outcomes for officers and staff

1. There was no indication any police officer had behaved in a manner justifying bringing disciplinary proceedings or had committed a criminal offence.

Questions to consider

Questions for policy makers and managers

1. Do you give officers clear guidance or training on when and how life hammers should be used?
2. How does your force make sure where life hammers are used, these are replaced when required in line with manufacturer guidance?
3. What training, guidance or equipment does your force give to officers to help them gain access to vehicles when needed?

Questions for police officers and police staff

4. Are you aware life hammers are provided solely as an escape tool?