

The New York Ten

By GERALD ASTOR

On Aug. 26 of this year, passers-by discovered the body of police Sgt. Joseph Morabito in his own car, parked 500 feet off the Belt Parkway in Brooklyn. Sergeant Morabito, with two bullet wounds in his head, became the 10th member of the New York City Police Department to be killed during 1971, more than in any single year since 1930. The city's experience is not unique; policemen are being murdered and assaulted at record levels nationally. Not only law-enforcement people but Congressional investigators have speculated on the existence of a conspiracy against policemen, and the International Association of Chiefs of Police, which keeps track of police casualties, has created a new category—"ambushes." Even if no plot threatens what President Nixon labels "the peace forces," is there any explanation for the rising toll? Under what circumstances are policemen attacked? Are the assailants somehow connected? Are they pursuing social or political ends, either their own or an organization's? The New York 10, killed in a city prototypical in most urban ills, can serve as a melancholy microcosm for a study of all of the assaults upon policemen. Here are the ways in which they died.

THE first officer to become a homicide victim this year was 45-year-old Patrolman Robert Bolden of the 75th Precinct in Brooklyn, normally assigned as a public-school guard. Patrolman Bolden, off duty and out of



Patrolman Robert Bolden.

uniform, was in Dunne's Bar and Grill on Gold Street in Brooklyn at 10 P.M. on Jan. 22. It was a Friday, normally a busy night in a neighborhood bar, but Dunne's only other occupant, except for the bartender, John Gallagher, was a man in a telephone booth. Gallagher decided to close up. Indicating the man in the booth, he asked Bolden, "Can you get him out?" The officer walked back to the booth and, according to police reports, asked the man—like Bolden, black—to leave. Whether or not Bolden identified himself as a policeman is unknown. Apparently satisfied there was no problem, Bolden returned to the bar, but when the man emerged from the booth, he whipped a sawed-off shotgun from beneath his coat and fired once, wounding Bolden in the thumb. The patrolman drew his own weapon and managed to get off two ineffective shots before a second blast from the shotgun caught him in the chest. He fell, fatally wounded. While the killer fled, two other men entered

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Dunne's, grabbed Bolden's pistol and disappeared. Police theorized that the killer actually had planned to hold up Dunne's as soon as the last customer had left and that Bolden, relaying the bartender's request, had unwittingly interrupted the scheme. Five days later, a suspect was picked up, questioned and released. The case is still open.

LESS than a month later, on Feb. 15, Detective Joseph Picciano, 33 and white, became the second officer to die this year. The day before he was killed, the 41st Precinct in the



Detective Joseph Picciano.

Bronx had received a report that a 13-year-old boy, after attending a movie, had been abducted by a man. Some time after midnight, the boy walked into the station house and told the police he had just escaped from his captor. Detectives, led by the child, arrested Antonio Alemany nearby. The accused man's police record included arrests for assaults and burglary in Puerto Rico and Cleveland and a 1968 New York City charge of endangering the welfare of a child.

Detective Picciano, described by a colleague as "a gentleman, a guy who went along with whatever people felt had to be done," was routinely fingerprinting Alemany in the precinct squad room when he began to struggle with the detective for reasons that remain obscure. During the scuffle, Detective Picciano's service revolver fell to the floor and Alemany seized

it. Said a witness: "He fired two quick shots, hitting him [Picciano] in the chest and belly." As Picciano fell, Alemany pegged several shots at the two other detectives in the room, Joseph Marrero and Richard Ware. They returned the fire while crouched behind overturned tables. Detective William Lally of the burglary unit heard the exchange, rushed into the room and fired four shots at Alemany. One struck him in the throat, killing him instantly.

ON Feb. 19, four members of the Preventive Enforcement Patrol were staked out on the third floor of a Harlem tenement during a narcotics investigation when the elevator stopped and opened. The policemen pushed inside, telling the two men passengers, "We're police, we want



Patrolman Horace Lord.

to talk to you." The men responded with gunfire, and a bizarre, brief shootout followed in the cramped elevator. When it ended, Patrolman Horace Lord had been fatally wounded in the chest; Patrolman Londell Davis was shot in the shoulder, but recovered; one of the two assailants, John D. Adams, 25, was killed by the injured Davis and the other captured. Adams had twice been imprisoned for crimes involving the use of a gun.

The special unit of which the murdered Patrolman Lord was a member, better known as the PEP squad, consists entirely of nonwhites who are expected to have more than a vocational interest in black ghetto crime. As a PEP sergeant once said, "That's my family living in Harlem, my grandmother, and I want to protect her." Lord, 26, was said to be one of the PEP squad's best. He had been a high-school dropout who then earned an equivalency certificate when he decided he wanted to be a policeman. "He was very intelligent," said his superior, Lieut. Hamilton Robinson. "One of the greatest guys I knew, always out in front. If it weren't for him we'd have been caught short on other occasions. He was a leader, studying for the sergeant's exam. He would have gone places in the department."

ON Feb. 20, only one day after the PEP squad shootout, Mrs. Vicky Thompson of Queens telephoned her brother, Earl M. Thompson, a 34-year-old black detective, and asked for his help in a quarrel with her husband, Mark Thompson, 21. Detective Thompson, a mail clerk in civilian life 11 years ago, had worked his way

up in the department from his days as a probationary patrolman. He had served in the Tactical Patrol Force, spent a month training at the Police Academy in criminal investigation and was on the taxi and truck unit of the 114th Detective Squad. When the officer arrived at



Detective Earl M. Thompson.

his sister's apartment, Mark Thompson attempted to leave, taking the couple's child with him. Says the official police report: "While attempting to insure his sister's safety, Detective Thompson was shot by his brother-in-law." The weapon was a .38-caliber Smith & Wesson and the bullet that entered the right side of the policeman's chest proved fatal. Mark Thompson was arrested and now awaits trial.

ON May 5, after attending a birthday party and the reunion of a softball team called the Lions, Brooklyn-based narcotics detective Ivan G. Lorenzo, along with three women and three men friends, stopped across the street from the Moonlight Bar and Grill in the Bronx. They were in two cars. While Detective Lorenzo waited in his automobile, several of his companions entered the Moonlight for a last drink; it was not quite 2 A.M. A woman with Lorenzo decided that she wanted to use a bathroom and, accompanied by the police officer, she entered the Sun Brite Bar, right at the spot where Lorenzo had parked. Inside the Sun Brite, the woman mistakenly entered a door that led to the kitchen and she was somewhat harshly informed that her destination lay across the hall. Meanwhile, Detective Lorenzo stood silently near the bar. He had been drinking earlier in the evening but had no drinks while he waited. When his companion rejoined him, he led her outside and then announced that he was going back into the Sun Brite. Two of his male friends, neither of whom was a policeman, went with him. Inside, Lorenzo approached a chunkily-built black man and, according to a police witness, said, "I want to speak to you."

The man replied, "I have nothing to say to you." Without further discussion, he whirled, drawing a gun. Detective Lorenzo attempted to bring his pistol into play but the other man fired a single and fatal bullet into his chest. The killer pointed his weapon at Lorenzo's companions and ordered, "Freeze, and walk to the back of the bar." Then he escaped

with Detective Lorenzo's off-duty revolver.

When detectives subsequently searched the Sun Brite they discovered 14 decks of heroin, leading them to theorize that the murderer had figured Lorenzo and his female friend were from the Police Department, and had fired to avoid arrest. However, an official of the department said, "There's no way to know whether the man knew Lorenzo was a cop or not. Lorenzo worked in Brooklyn, not the Bronx, and wouldn't have been known there. The man could have thought it was a stickup. Lorenzo, 29, was, like his murderer, black.

With information from witnesses, police identi-



Detective Ivan G. Lorenzo.

fied a suspect and issued an alarm for a man with a narcotics history who is believed to have been high on cocaine at the time of the shooting. He is still at large.

ON May 21, a Radio Motor Patrol car in Sector J of the 32d Precinct in Manhattan took a call requesting aid at 159-20 Harlem River Drive. In the car were Patrolmen Waverly Jones, 34, black and a member of the department since Aug. 1, 1966, and Joseph Piagentini, 28, white

and a graduate of the same police class as his partner. Before they became policemen, Jones had worked as a paper cutter and Piagentini as a check sorter. The black officer, known as something of a loner, had spent four years in the Air Force. The white officer, who bred German shepherd dogs as a hobby, had a reputation as an easy-going fellow who struggled to improve his education with night-school classes.

It was about 10:30 P.M. when Patrolmen Jones and Piagentini responded to the call for help. The address was in a housing project on the northern edge of Harlem, a development that had replaced the Polo Grounds, the demolished former home of the New York Giants. The patrolmen parked their vehicle in the narrow roadway that circles the buildings and went to the apartment of a woman whose ear had been slashed. However, she refused their offer to call an ambulance. Such emergency service is not dispatched in New York City without verification of need by the police.

Satisfied that they could be of no further help and that the problem seemed solved, the two officers left the building and walked toward their car. They passed two young black men sitting on a parked car. An eyewitness, at a window overlooking the scene, described what followed to a Newsweek reporter: "I saw these two guys sitting on a white car, just sitting there talking to each other. As the cops walked by, the kids jumped up and ran behind them. They were about five feet away. I guess the cops felt them come up instinctively. They didn't even get around before the kids started to shoot. The colored cop went down slower. They shot him once; then they shot him in the head. Then they leaned over the two cops, who were stretched out on the ground. They took their guns and shot the cops again. After that, the two guys ran up the hill and disappeared."

Actually, the assassins did not vanish quite so quickly. They paused long enough to warn an-

What concerns cops the most is the escalation in the level of violence

other witness, Clarence Lee, to be silent (he was not), and then fled. Housing police summoned by youngsters from their office next door to the building where the policemen had gone to answer the call, arrived soon after. Both Jones and Piagentini were already dead.

Late in August, San Francisco police Sgt.



Patrolmen Waverly Jones and Joseph Piagentini.

George Kowalski reported that a car with two black men in it pulled alongside him while he waited at a traffic signal. One man poked a machine gun out the window and squeezed the trigger, but the weapon failed to fire. When the car raced away, Sergeant Kowalski gave chase and called for help. Several shots were fired and eventually the fleeing car smashed into another automobile. The police captured the pair, one of whom had been wounded in the neck and calf. During a search of the wrecked car, a .38-caliber revolver was found; its serial number matched that of the one taken from Patrolman Piagentini's body. New York detectives, representatives of the Manhattan District Attorney's office and some of the witnesses to the murder of the two policemen flew to San Francisco to view the two prisoners, Tony Bottom, 19, and Robert Johnson, 21, both of whom are San Francisco residents. A Manhattan grand jury indicted Bottom for the murders of Jones and Piagentini, but refused to indict Johnson. Police are still looking for the second man involved in the killings.

On the night of July 24, at about 2 A.M., Patrolman Robert Denton, white, 26, and his partner, Patrolman Nelsa Abraham, were on duty in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. Richard Lloyd Dennis, a black man, approached the prowl car to ask how to go about becoming an officer, according to a witness. Patrolman



Denton supplied Dennis with some information. It was in character for Denton. A comrade described him as "a friendly guy, a good kidder but one who took his job seriously." A college student for a year, a former paratrooper, Denton was an amateur wrestler and was studying police science at the State University in Farmingdale.

Minutes after his conversation with Dennis, Denton left the parked prowl car and walked into the Baby Bodega, a small grocery store, to get a pack of cigarettes. Patrolman Abraham remained in the car. Dennis, who had preceded the officer into the store, followed him outside. One witness reported that Dennis shouted something about not being able to trust a white man. Without any apparent provocation, Dennis attacked the officer with a bowie knife, stabbing him twice in the throat. Bleeding to death, the policeman staggered into the arms of Patrolman Abraham while Dennis tried to flee. But people from the neighborhood, still out on the streets on the hot, humid night, seized Dennis. "He wasn't handled with kid gloves," said a detective later, after Dennis had been taken to a hospital to have his cuts and bruises attended to by a doctor.

Investigation disclosed that though he had no criminal record, Dennis had a history of mental illness. "He had a record of violence," said a high-ranking police officer. "He should have been under psychiatric care instead of out on the street at night." Dennis has been indicted and is awaiting trial.

On the night of Aug. 20, Patrolman Kenneth Nugent, a 40-year-old white, was on his way to the 103d Precinct in Jamaica, Queens, for the midnight to 8 A.M. shift. He walked into a luncheonette and candy store en route and found himself in the midst of a holdup by four black men. Nugent went for his pistol and the



Patrolman Kenneth Nugent.

holdup men began shooting. Although struck in the head by a bullet, Patrolman Nugent managed to fire twice, killing one of the gunmen. But Nugent himself died of his wounds. The three survivors escaped, but police later arrested all of them. They have been indicted for Nugent's murder. The holdup man killed by Nugent was identified as Rudolph Green of New York.

The most mysterious of the 10 deaths is that of Sgt. Joseph Morabito, 29, whose body was found near the Belt Parkway on Aug. 26. A black

Patrolman Robert Denton.

officer who worked with him in one of the roughest areas in Brooklyn, filled with prostitutes, pimps and junkies, said of his former partner, "Morabito had no hangups except maybe education. He was very sharp, honest. You can't say anything bad about the fellow. Everything he did, he did by the book. He was meticulous, but a likable person, a terrific guy." Another associate, who knew Morabito when he worked on patrol assignments, said, "He was a very intense guy, very well respected, even by the whores. He was a good, honest cop who did a good day's work."

From patrol duty, bachelor Morabito, a seven-year veteran of the department, shifted to the narcotics detail about a year before his death. The change appeared to be an unhappy one. Whatever doubts the sergeant may have had about the requirements for being an effective narcotics detective are not public, but it is known that Morabito wanted to complete his



Sergeant Joseph Morabito.

education. His work, with its irregular hours and its demands, jeopardized his attendance at college, where he hoped to earn the final credits he needed for a diploma.

On the night that he was killed, Sergeant Morabito was technically off duty. But narcotics assignments often intrude upon a detective's private life. The place where the white detective was murdered is in a predominantly white neighborhood, not far from Morabito's home, yet no one has come forward with information about the murder. Whoever killed him shot from close range. And while his wallet was intact, the two pistols he carried were missing. Police officials concede the possibility that someone stole the weapons after the murder.

One way to analyze the 10 killings is by statistics. Five of the dead officers were black, five were white. In the nine instances where police believe they know the identity of the killers, killed them or arrested suspects, all were nonwhite. Eight of the murders involved handguns; one, a sawed-off shotgun, and one, a knife. Chief of Detectives Albert Seedman, reiterating a thesis expounded by both Mayor John V. Lindsay and Police Commissioner Patrick V. Murphy, says, "One of the reasons for the increase in the killings of policemen is the increase in the number of guns. These days everybody seems to have a gun. We have a good gun law in New York State but you'd need a strict border patrol to make it work."

One other statistic, perhaps irrelevant in a consideration of whether any antipolice plot exists but one that ought to be remembered:

he dead men left nine widows and 23 fatherless children.

Of the nine cases in which the identities of the murderers are believed known, only one could be labeled a "grounded," a homicide in which the killer and his victim are known to each other. That involved Detective Earl Thompson and his brother-in-law. Said a detective who investigated, "This had nothing to do with being a policeman. This was a family dispute in which an officer happened to be one of the parties."

Leaving aside the mystery surrounding the death of Sgt. Morabito, the cop killings in New York, with the one exception of the two men gunned down from the rear, were all preceded by some confrontation between the murderer and his victim. In two cases, the shootings of Robert Bolden and Ivan Lorenzo, it is quite possible that the criminal did not know his target was a policeman. Patrolman Nugent interrupted a crime and Patrolman Lord was part of a group about to interrogate or perhaps even arrest some suspects. Two of the deaths, Detective Picciano's and Patrolman Denton's, appear to have been caused by mentally disturbed individuals.

Psychopathic behavior and resistance to arrest are not new. But what concerns law-enforcement authorities from the rank of commissioner down to the prowler-car patrolman is the escalation in the level of violence. A Harlem cop commented: "It's not just the assaults upon police. You just can't believe the way the people here maim one another. I've seen cases where a woman has almost cut the head off a guy." National statistics support the police view. Violent crime, which the F.B.I. limits to murder, forcible rape, robbery and aggravated assault, rose 156 per cent over the past 10 years, far outstripping population growth.

The police deaths in New York City this year represent about an 11 per cent increase over 1970 (although this comparison includes only the first 11 months of 1971), not out of proportion with the growth of violent crime where the injured party is a civilian. However, an assault upon a policeman would seem to a middle-class white mind a crime of a considerably different order from an attack upon another civilian. Policemen carry arms at all times, even when off duty. The risk of fatal retaliation by an officer is high; in fact, three men who participated in the killings of the New York 10 did die as a consequence of their acts. New York State still permits the death penalty for cop killing; the price for the murder of a civilian is lower, a maximum of life imprisonment. It would appear from the statistics that a growing number of people in this country not only value the lives of others more cheaply, but seem willing to discount their own existences. Such an attitude is not difficult to comprehend if one considers the quality of life in the American nonwhite ghetto. And all of the known killers of the New York cops in 1971 were nonwhite.

What must equally puzzle the middle-class mind is the readiness of civilians to challenge the representatives of law and order, even if the risk is small or nonexistent. A black reporter explains it: "The people are just fed up with being hassled by the cops. So they fight back, even though the cops have guns." Chief Seedman says, "It's a manifestation of the trend toward disrespect for law and order and those who represent law and order." The revelations of the Knapp Commission and reports

of police corruption around the country inevitably add to the erosion of respect for policemen in the ghetto. Testimony before the Knapp Commission included charges of corruption even in the PEP squad, where Patrolman Lord was working when he died. It is conceivable that some drug pushers confronted by policemen might think not in terms of an arrest but of extortion, seizure of narcotics and money. If corruption is as widespread as the Knapp Commission suggests—or, for that matter, if people merely believe corruption permeates most police actions—the reaction to a police officer's attempt to carry out his duties honestly may be that of resistance to a shakedown instead of submission to a lawful arrest.

With five of the dead officers black and five white, the killings seem to have little in the way of racial overtones. Certainly, white policemen in New York have been schooled to keep whatever prejudices they may have to themselves, and cops mind their racial speech and manners now more than ever before. Chief Seedman dismisses the idea that there is a racial war involved. "They are shooting them because they are patrolmen. Color has nothing to do with it. Black policemen cannot expect to be exempt from those who've made up their minds to kill policemen. In fact, black policemen may be more prone to this sort of thing because more of them work in the kind of areas where it happens."

THE question of conspiracy arises in the deaths of Patrolmen Waverly Jones and Joseph Piagentini, the only officers killed without any kind of confrontation with their murderers. Their deaths occurred only a few days after two other officers were seriously wounded by machine-gun fire when they chased a car going the wrong way on a one-way section of Riverside Drive. Two days after that incident, a license plate from the car, along with a .45-caliber cartridge, was delivered to The New York Times. An accompanying message explained that the assault was an act of "Revolutionary Justice." The immediate reaction was to attribute the two murders to the same men who made the earlier machine-gun assault. But the conspiracy theory suffered seriously when the descriptions of the men who participated indicated that different individuals were involved. Subsequently, several men were arrested and charged with the machine-gunning, but not with the murders of the two patrolmen.

Yet Chief Seedman says that Tony Bottom, under indictment in the Jones-Piagentini murders, "was known for having moved in militant circles on the West Coast." Seedman, referring to other years and non-New York cases, adds: "In several cases where policemen have been killed or injured, we have become aware that the perpetrators seem to be acquaintances of one another or indirectly connected with one another through third parties. This leads us to believe that some of these cases are the results of organized conspiracy."

The words "organized" and "conspiracy" are clearly the freighted words: they are frightening, to ordinary citizens as well as police; they transform what might otherwise be considered simply one more manifestation of urban violence into something qualitatively different. Though they may often be justified, they are words that can be used lightly and unjustifiably: careful investigation has demonstrated that the trumpeted Chicago police raid on a Black Panther headquarters—in which two Panther leaders were

killed—was, in reality, a police crime. Perhaps most important, if less obvious, is the danger that preoccupation with a possible conspiracy will divert attention from where it really belongs: on the causes and prevention of criminal acts.

The New York City Police Department will not divulge the specific information that leads it to actively suspect that an organized conspiracy exists. There probably are valid investigative reasons for withholding such information, but without it there are also valid reasons to withhold judgment on the conspiracy theory. Even in the murders of Jones and Piagentini, the officers had, by police admission, answered a legitimate call. Planned attacks upon cops usually begin with a false report of a crime that lures officers to a scene where they become easy targets for a sniper. A traffic violation, such as moving in the wrong direction on a one-way street, may attract police attention that can be converted into an assault. But in the Jones-Piagentini murders there could not have been any real planning in advance. And, except for Seedman's unspecific reference to the "militant circles" in which Bottom allegedly



moved, there is, so far as the public knows, no evidence that any of the identified or accused police killers in New York had an organizational or personal motive—aside from simple criminality—for their acts.

Chief Seedman counters: "If you stand on a corner long enough, a policeman will pass by. They [Jones and Piagentini] were a target of opportunity. Here are two people picked up in California, Bottom and Johnson. They were in California and in New York. People from California have been arrested in New York for assaults. If such a conspiracy exists, it is practically national in scope. Our investigation of the murders of Jones and Piagentini took us to a number of states. The people who were arrested in the machine-gunning were involved in a Panther case. In the course of investigations of these cases we solved a shooting of a policeman in Queens two years ago. We keep running across the same people either as direct participants or conspirators in one case after another."

Whether any serious conspiratorial threat exists remains to be proved. But at best, given the increasing number of officers killed or assaulted, law-abiding citizens will pay a price for these acts. Concerned with their safety, policemen inevitably will be forced to move more cautiously when summoned, thereby reducing their effectiveness. ■