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The police are about to ask the State Industrial Commission for more money — 20 percent more, based on the contention that they suffer more stress than men and women in any other occupation.

Maybe they'll get the money. There is evidence from detailed studies in other places — Victoria, South Australia, Britain, the United States — to suggest that the cops have a frightening casualty rate.



No other peacetime calling exacts such a toll in terms of physical deterioration, nervous troubles, mental breakdowns, alcoholism, preventable accident or death.

You wouldn't think so to observe the neighbourhood policeman placidly following his outsize belly to work each day.

He's in lousy shape, sure. Ask him to catch the thief who's just grabbed your wallet and he'd probably have a coronary from over-exertion dialling for a patrol car.

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By DON PETERSEN

But is there a mass of work-induced neuroses behind that badge? Sadly, from a public image point of view, the police themselves are now going to have to argue that yes, it's probably true.

And in all fairness to them it is about time. Traditionally the cops haven't talked much about stress: there has been a macho image to project and uphold.

A classic "in group", a paramilitary family with intense loyalties which serve to bolster individual self-esteem, they'll open up about the hazards of life, facing danger and so on.

Yet few of them are ever shot at or fire a gun in combat.

But emotional stress — what uncertainty, public animosity, an often rigid and inflexible command structure, role conflict and disintegrating home lives do to men ill-equipped to handle them — is rarely mentioned, even within the ranks.

Now, at the pay rise hearing, it will all come out — from expert testimony, local evidence and the results of interstate and international studies.

It doesn't pre-empt the hearing to suggest that one thing will stand out clearly: Society expects far too much from men and women poorly screened at recruitment and then inadequately trained.

From the moment they are given a badge, policemen are "first-at-the-sceners." The community expects them at a moment's notice to handle

social chaos, human tragedy and tense but fragile domestic situations with competence, maturity and understanding.

It is true to say that a policeman daily sees the worst of people and people at their worst.

The screening process — designed to weed out the emotionally and intellectually incapable — is still laughably inadequate as police disciplinary records show.

And a basic training of five months — most of it devoted to legal training, police procedures, rules of evidence, etc — scarcely equips anybody to handle human need in a complex society.

To cite one instance: How can a 20-year-old policeman, virtually untrained in human relationships, be expected to handle a couple in their 50s who, unable to cope with each other, resort to temporary violence.

Yet this is where most Queensland policemen are killed in action — in the white heat of somebody else's anger.

Stress is born here in the inability to cope with a simple family crisis. There are worse situations to come in a policeman's life and all of them lead, according to massive evidence, to high levels of early retirement, mental breakdown and even suicide.

Booze is a popular outlet for all high stress occupations, including journalism.

Says the former Victorian police surgeon, Dr. John Birrell: "If an individual has within him the capa-

city to become an alcoholic he just can't miss in the police service."

His records abound with dossiers of policemen who have hit the bottle and been retired because of it, or been killed in bike and car accidents.

The contributing factors are innumerable, he says: Shift work, irregular and poor meals and facilities, battles in court, an unfavourable press, estrangement from society . . .

#### IRRITABLE

"No wonder the policeman gets irritable, edgy, nervous, or seeks solace in the bottle, often under the guise of being a social drinker.

"The community establishes a police force with rigidly specified tasks, then does its best to frustrate the police and feels pleased when it does. Injustice in this community seems to me to be done more to the Crown than to any single person."

Behind the stress which drives many police to drink are a number of factors, the first of which, argues Dr. John Clark, an American sociologist, is a sense of isolation from the community.

In Australia — and particularly in Queensland says Dr. Paul Wilson, a Brisbane criminologist — this is caused by an historical accumulation of fear, mistrust and disdain for the man behind the badge. He is an authority figure, frequently seen as threatening or punitive.

The civil liberties issue in Queensland aggravates this feeling, Dr.

Wilson says. Young policemen, particularly, feel a role conflict in confronting street marchers although there are others who seem to enjoy it.

The response of many police drives the wedge deeper, writes Dr. Clark. They believe that the less they mix with the people to be policed the freer they feel to detect, harass and apprehend their fellow citizens.

"The subsequent lack of a spirit of free co-operation decreases police morale and cripples their service. The policeman regards the public as his enemy, feels his occupation to be in conflict with the community and regards himself as a pariah."

It might be added that when a policeman's wife and children, by association, are subjected to similar pressures and hostilities his alienation is complete.

Rules and regulations handcuff a policeman's discretion. Does he jail a harmless drunk or help him the last few steps home?

If in kindness he departs from departmental regulations he can find himself before a disciplinary board hearing.

An acute cause of stress in Queensland, it will be argued, is the transfer to isolated country areas — moves which often cause families hardship or break them up.

The outback has pressures of its own. The cop can be ordered to raid community or sporting club keg parties or gambling nights.

What does this do to the youngster who knows that this often is the only way such groups can raise funds for community amenities, facilities which his own children and friends might enjoy? He has to begin to hate himself a bit.

There is always the unexpected: What is a policeman's gut reaction to a destroyed child — a horror made more stark by the knowledge that his own youngsters are safely tucked up in bed? Does he then begin to hate society?

A policeman's life is ordered by an authoritarian command structure, his future often is in the hands of inflexible and insensitive administrators.

In Queensland the bright rookie can look forward to promotion largely by seniority. At the same time he is being taught much the same things that were taught several generations ago while in hundreds of ways community thinking is outpacing the laws by which he must operate.

Cops, particularly the older ones, are conservative and monumentally clubbish, in part to combat levels of anger, hostility and abuse from outside.

This breeds in them what is called the "John Wayne" syndrome.

Martin Reiser, Los Angeles police department psychologist, says that in self defence a cop becomes "cynical, overly serious, emotionally withdrawn (especially from his family), cold and authoritarian.

"He has an enormous need to identify with his brother officers. With other people he tends to be overly aggressive. He sees 'good guys' and 'bad guys.'

### 'SUPERCOP'

"He has a macho, 'supercop' image that he feels he has to live up to, which means that he can't confide in anyone, especially his wife."

So it is not a pretty picture — although a very human one. The telling of the story of stress in a cop's life — which is what will happen before the State Industrial Commission — should be more than a little damaging to the force's self image.

Perhaps a pay rise will be worth it. But what of the stress itself, and its underlying causes?

Dr Wilson: "Trends for the future suggest that the levels of stress in police work must increase."

Already, he said, there were big increases in the incidence of domestic disputes, violent crimes like rape and armed robbery.

Crime by the unemployed would rise as the young, particularly, became more angry at their inability to share in Australia's wealth.

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\*Since this article first appeared the Queensland Police industrial pay/stress case resulted in the awarding of an eight per cent increase.

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## EAGLE'S EYE

Constable Wayne Eagles looks at the prospect of an AFP mounted troop.

