



Dilemma of the Black Cop

Renault Robinson stands beneath
the emblem of the Afro-American
Patrolmen's League of Chicago.

Courtesy LIFE Magazine (c) Time Inc.
1970.

'We get it from both sides'

Dilemma of the Black Cop

by RICHARD HALL

Sometime next week the Police Board of Chicago will hear the case of a young militant black policeman who has accumulated so many suspensions over the past 15 months he has been recommended for dismissal from the force. Before this tribunal will stand the accused, Renault Robinson, 28, and with him his two black lawyers, Eric Graham and Kermit Coleman. It will be their task to convince the board that Robinson has been the victim of a deliberate and prolonged campaign of harassment waged by some of his supervisors and other police department hierarchy; that this harassment was intended to discourage Robinson and other black policemen from continuing in their efforts to organize Chicago's 1,800 black policemen into an activist group working for police reform; and that it is no mere coincidence that Robinson's troubles started in the summer of 1968, right after he and several other discontented black policemen banded together to form this group, the Afro-American Patrolmen's League of Chicago.

They will likely cite as one example a suspension Robinson received after serving on a police detail at a high school disturbance. During a calm that day, the detail sergeant gave the men permission to remove their riot helmets. Some took them off, others kept them on. Robinson took his off. A captain came along and spotted Robinson. "Write him up," he told the

sergeant. "He doesn't have his helmet on." The sergeant tried to explain that he had given the men permission to take off the helmets. "I didn't ask you anything," the captain told him. "I gave you an order."

What happens to Robinson at the hearing will in some measure affect black policemen everywhere in the nation. One of them is Officer Curt Monson, of the Los Angeles Police Department, who is deeply involved in an organization that is smaller and nowhere near as radicalized as Robinson's but is gradually growing in both membership and militancy. It is Monson who best articulates the plight of America's black policemen. "We're caught in the middle," he laments. "Trapped between the department and the black community."

In every major city in the U.S., black policemen share Officer Monson's dilemma. Even those who don't admit it are caught in a crossfire between a traditional law enforcement system and the black community's hostility toward it. When the black cop identifies with the system, he alienates himself from black people. When he identifies with black people, he alienates himself from the system. Most times he finds himself in some vague middle area, a loner. Curt Monson, typical of the majority, stands on that vacillating middle ground. Renault Robinson has left it behind, only to find himself on equally shaky ground further up the road. The lives of these two young policemen tell us much about the black cop today, the range of his predicament and the ways he has chosen to deal with it.

The author, a former LIFE reporter, is currently writing a novel based on the civil rights struggle in the South.

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'To most blacks, I'm a black pig'

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On this particular day, Officer Monson drives his unmarked police car along the Harbor Freeway toward Watts. He is a broad-shouldered, muscular man with a young face, mustache and Afro-style haircut. "To most black people," he is saying, "a pig is a pig is a pig' and I'm just a *black pig*. A traitor. A Tom. A sellout. An Oreo nigger—black on the outside, white on the inside."

Officer Monson is 29, married, with one daughter. He lives on an integrated street and for the past two and a half years he has been assigned to the Los Angeles Police Department's Community Relations Unit. His Oscar Joel Bryant Association has, he estimates, about 150 members out of the 315 black officers in the LAPD. "We share experiences," he is saying. "We have ventilation sessions. We try to help close the gap between the police and the black community. There are lots of guys like me who want to relate to the black community but who are kept at a distance because they're policemen."

In Monson's case the pain of such rejection is especially excruciating. Though born in Lyons, Texas, he moved with his family to Los Angeles, to Watts, when he was 12 and spent the remainder of his boyhood there, on the hot chalk-scribbled pavements. Watts is where he first excelled in basketball and football, where he built the interest in athletics that

remains with him. Watts is where he went to high school, where he received the education that led him to California State College at Dominguez. It is to this black community, Watts, that Monson listens for echoes of his beginning, for those reinforcements that he desperately needs to maintain his conviction that Monson the black man has not been closed out of the fold.

In Watts, Monson stops the car at the House of Uhuru, a converted store that serves as a community rehabilitation center for drug addicts. Near the entrance two black men stand talking, and when they see Monson, one bolts away. Monson walks over and talks to the other. Soon, a third black man appears in the doorway. There is something menacing in his casual stance, in the brooding luster of his eyes. He is Marcus Anderson, the center's program coordinator. He is tall, lean and wears a faded blue Levi suit, a green T-shirt and a fur cap. In his hand is a white paper bag. He opens it and takes out a hamburger.

Monson greets him and Anderson says nothing. There is no movement on the surface of that hard face. He takes a bite of the hamburger. "What do you want, man?"

Monson smiles. "I was just talking here about some of the new community relations programs

In front of the House of Uhuru in Watts, Marcus Anderson (left) stares stonily as Officer Monson (right) talks about police-community relations.

'I want the real police—not you'

we're trying to come up with down at headquarters." Anderson chews. Monson's smile begins to disappear. "Like our Basic Car Plan, for instance," Monson says. "Nine policemen—and only those nine—work the same area for at least two years. And each month during that time an open meeting is held, say at a public school in the area. These nine policemen must be present at each meeting to face the people of the community. You know, hear their complaints, answer their questions, take their accusations." He pauses and looks expectantly into Anderson's face. Nothing. "There're a lot of things we're trying to do," Monson says. "But there are a lot of things that still have to be done."

Anderson leans a shoulder against the door. "When there are many things to do, brother," he says, "the thing that takes the longest to do must be started first. The first thing you've got to do is convince the people you're not a pig. The people, that's what counts. We ain't got no money. So the only thing we got are people. That's our power. And the people see the police department as part of a giant CIA network. We don't even know that you're really doing what you say you're doing at headquarters. We don't know what you're telling the chief." Anderson gathers his lips as though to spit, but doesn't.

The activity in the doorway has attracted others. They stand looking from Anderson's face to Monson's. "Look," Monson says, finally. "I'm not going to stand here and say that all 8,000 policemen in the LAPD are good cops. I didn't come out here to lie. But there are some good policemen. And we do have a chief now who'll listen." He wipes his forehead and looks directly at Anderson. Anderson has taken a French-fried onion ring from the bag and is eating it. "I'm a cop," Monson tells him. "There's no getting around that. But I'm a black man first. I grew up here in Watts. I can relate to the problems of the black community. And I think other police can learn to do that too."

Anderson spits out part of an onion ring. Monson watches it hit the pavement. "Relate to what part of the community?" Anderson says. "Black doctors and lawyers? Some niggers think they got 40 acres and a mule, but all they really got is a donkey and a vegetable patch." A man in the crowd, sensing an opportunity to ridicule middle-class blacks, laughs. Monson seizes the moment and brays his own laughter. Soon everybody is laughing.

Anderson polishes off the last onion ring and lights a cigarette. "You're not a bad guy," he tells Monson. "I give you credit for one thing. You're taking the right risks. You're willing to expose yourself. I can't tell that white policeman who rides up and down this street all day what's on my mind, so I'm telling you, and you've got to stand there and listen to me like ev-

erything wrong with the police department is your fault. But that's the risk you have to take when you come out here."

Back in the car, Monson stares straight ahead as he drives. "I know how they feel. But they don't know how bad I feel. I get it from both sides."

In the black community the black cop must live not only with accusations of doing the white man's dirty work but also with other indignities. It is not all that unusual, a black Chicago cop has said, to answer a call from a black person in trouble and to be told: "Who the hell called you? I want the 'real' police." Nor is it unusual, on the other hand, to hear openly the prejudices of his white fellow officer. Monson one day was assigned to a squad car with a white officer who said, "I sure hope you're open-minded. I mean, I just hope you're not thin-skinned. I might arrest some guy and slip and call him a nigger. Now, I'm not calling you a nigger. I just have a tendency to slip." Monson's reply was: "I hope you're not thin-skinned. But if you do start slipping, be prepared for me to take your head off."

Each day the black cops grow more vocal, speaking out against the hidden and overt prejudices of the police institution, pointing out how they so often feel they are being used not to help, but mainly to contain, control and, in some instances, exterminate their own people. "Reform must come from the people," one has said, "but the problem is that from the

Controversial plans for reform

standpoint of white people, the police are okay. The policeman is their friend. But when he's put in the ghetto he considers himself there to guard niggers. It's a delicate balance between a weapon of control and a weapon of destruction."

To help make the police more accountable to the communities and to aid their own credibility in those communities, black policemen are banding together in increasing numbers to form associations. These associations have been formed to help bridge the gap between police and black communities. All too often, though, in a sad extension of society at large, they have also widened the gap between white and black police. For as the black police have studied the problem, many of them have come to the conclusion that a solution lies only in drastic change of the law enforcement system; they have suggested, for example, that black cops exclusively patrol black neighborhoods. And in the police force, as elsewhere, there has been fear of change, accompanied by rhetoric, resistance and racial polarization.

Even in Los Angeles, where the police hierarchy seems eager to implement imaginative community relations programs in the black ghetto, police nerves are nonetheless sensitive to internal criticism. "For

years I had kept my mouth shut." Officer Monson has said. "When I finally started speaking out I was very diplomatic about it. Even so, my supervisor called me into his office one day and said he thought I was becoming a bitter man. Then he said he thought I was being influenced in the wrong way and that he was seriously concerned about my future with the department."

In Los Angeles there is Officer Monson's Oscar Joel Bryant Association, in New York there is the Society of Afro-American Policemen. San Francisco has the Officers for Justice, Philadelphia and Detroit have the Guardians. In Chicago there is the most polarized association, Renault Robinson's Afro-American Patrolmen's League.

It's 6:30 a.m. and Renault Robinson, the president of the Afro-American Patrolmen's League, awakes and sits on the edge of his bed, yawning. It was almost 2:00 a.m. when he got to bed. With a sigh he gets up and stands in the silence, knowing that this day will not differ greatly from those he has lived through during the past months. His wife, Annette, and his two small sons, Brian and Renault, are still asleep. Annette is in her ninth month of pregnancy and their third child is due any day.

Robinson goes to the kitchen and makes himself a cup of coffee. Then he showers and begins to dress for work. First the black cotton socks, then the navy-blue pants with the white pencil-line stripe down the legs. Then the equipment belt with its jangling assortment of keys, a baton ring for his nightstick, a whistle, a full container of Mace and two leather cartridge pouches, each with six extra bullets. Finally he straps

Threatening calls every day

on the gun belt that holds the .38 Colt Trooper with the front sight missing. At the front door he draws on the heavy three-quarter-length coat called a "reefer" and adjusts the visor of his blue cap an even two inches above the bridge of his nose.

This is the last day he will wear the blue cap. About a week ago Robinson's superiors notified him—by phone—of his transfer from patrol duty to directing traffic in the Loop. Officers assigned to traffic wear a special cap with a white crown. The new hat, which he will have to buy today, will cost him approximately seven dollars. The transfer will cost him pride. Robinson has been told he has been transferred "for the good of the department." He is positive he has been transferred because of his work with the Afro-American Patrolmen's League.

About an hour after Robinson leaves his apartment, the telephone rings. Annette Robinson is at the stove cooking breakfast. She moves through the apartment slowly, picks up the receiver and says, "Hello."

"Where's that nigger?" a male voice says. "We're gonna kill him."

"What do you want?" Annette says under her breath. "Why don't you leave us alone?"

"We're gonna get him," the caller says. It is the same voice that called every hour all afternoon the day before.

Annette says nothing. She replaces the receiver and goes back to the kitchen. She has a shotgun there, which Renault bought for her and showed her how to use. She hopes the occasion will never arise.

Annette prepares breakfast for the two children. Soon the phone rings again. She does not answer it.

Robinson stands at the intersection of Congress and State streets directing traffic. He is of medium height, solidly put together and though his face is strangely expressionless, the mouth deadpan, the eyes flat and unrevealing, there is something about the face, something mildly combative, like the diluted hostility of a reformed street tough.

Until he was transferred to the traffic beat in the business center of Chicago, Robinson worked on the South Side among blacks. He himself was born and raised there, growing up as a smart, tough street kid. He attended Catholic schools, had to quit high school in his sophomore year to help support his mother, five sisters and two brothers, and he continued his education at night. Now Robinson is earning his bachelor's degree at Roosevelt University, but over the past two years, he has invested almost all his other free time and all his savings in the league. It now has 700 members out of the roughly 1,800 black policemen on Chicago's 13,700-man force. Many of the blacks who have not joined are older cops, with 15 or 20 years on the job, and Robinson respects their reluctance. But there are also the young black cops who oppose the league, particularly as it grows more militant. "You'll take us all down the drain with you," they keep telling Robinson.

What helps drive the league more militant is the hostility of the white cops. Interviewed for the record, Chicago's white policemen offer such disclaimers as: "I don't know anyone who belongs to the league," "I don't know anything about Robinson except what I read in the papers." Officially, Frank Sullivan, Director of Public Information for the Chicago Police Department, says: "There probably has been some hostility, as well as emotions of every kind. It might be two officers who don't want to work with each other, or 20 officers mad at one. But we have to carefully avoid generalizations."

Still, many white cops have categorized members of the Afro-American Patrolmen's League as "Black Panther Police." Some have stated that they could kill the black officers before the black cops could kill them. There have been fistfights between white and black officers in the police stations, and there has been friction with the police hierarchy—the lieutenants, the captains—and the resultant suspensions and transfers.

At the "cop shop," a store selling official police equipment, Renault Robinson tries on the white hat he must buy and wear on traffic duty.

Robinson's league was organized originally by eight policemen early in 1968. After some months, the league had grown noticeably, and Robinson's supervisor called him in and said, "What are you trying to start? A black Mafia?" The supervisor was then president of an all-Irish police association. He told Robinson he was opposed to an all-black group, that he felt it would be racist. He warned Robinson not to get any more involved.

Robinson and the others pressed on. They spoke out against police brutality. They asked that the responsibility for policing the police be taken out of the hands of the police themselves and transferred to an independent investigative bureau. They asked that police training be improved, with less military and more socially oriented, humanistic emphasis. They proposed that there be more civilian involvement at all levels of police work, and especially at policy-making levels. They began building the programs that now include community services such as legal aid, free investigation into charges of police brutality, and general advice to the public on police-related questions both in person and through a question-answer column in the black newspaper, the *Chicago Daily Defender*.

Four years as a 'Cinderella cop'

In May 1968, just after the league had applied for a state charter, Robinson left on a 10-day vacation. He had been on the force four years and was what po-

licemen call a "Cinderella cop." He had never once been suspended, had achieved an efficiency rating of 97%, had won more than 50 departmental citations for outstanding police work and, as an undercover agent, had led his district in vice-squad arrests over the past year. But the day he reported back to work he was told that he and his vice-squad partner, Frank Lee, a fellow league member, had been transferred. Commander William McCann, who was their commanding officer, says today that Robinson was transferred "because his work wasn't satisfactory. The vice coordinator, Sgt. Richard Barrett," Commander McCann continues, "requested that he be transferred because his work wasn't up to par. That's all there was to it. He just wasn't performing his job. This was not a disciplinary action. At the time of his transfer I didn't know anything about the league. I didn't know Robinson was in the league."

At his new precinct, where Robinson was assigned to patrol duty, his supervisor, a captain, told him: "I'm going to ride your back as hard as I can, and if you have certain views and opinions then you've got to be man enough to accept the consequences."

As he patrolled in his squad car, Robinson noticed that he was being "checked out" frequently by the duty sergeant—that he was being "tail-gated," followed around. Once, as Robinson was responding to a call, a sergeant waved him down en route. Robinson ran to the sergeant's car. "Why don't you have a hat on?" the sergeant asked. Robinson said that his mind was on the call, that he had jumped out of the car not thinking about his hat. The sergeant said: "I want a written report as to why you don't have a hat on." Robinson got back in the car and answered the radio call. The sergeant followed him. Another police car had already arrived and the sergeant who had followed Robinson now asked him: "Why were you late?" Robinson replied: "Because I stopped to talk to you."

"Don't get smart," the sergeant said. "Make out two reports. One for not having a hat on and another for responding late to a call." Robinson made out two reports. He was later found guilty on both charges and received a suspension. By then, he had begun moving from the middle.

Now, leaving his traffic post for lunch, Robinson walks to a phone booth and calls Nate Silas, one of the league's officers.

"How do you like your new white hat, captain?" Silas jokes.

"Don't laugh," Robinson says. "You could be next." Then seriously, "Did you hear that I got another recommendation for a suspension today?" Silas tells him no. "And I've got to appear at a Complaint Review Panel hearing at 2:30 this afternoon on still another charge."

"What for?"

"Who the hell knows?" Robinson says disgusted-

ly. "Maybe I scratched my head on duty." Since June of 1969 alone he has been suspended five times and has had 16 disciplinary charges filed against him. "I'll see you later," he tells Silas, hangs up and leaves for the "cop shop" to buy a white hat.

At the "cop shop," items that seem improbable to the civilian eye are on display, all neatly arranged, cataloged and price-tagged beneath gleaming glass counters: Mace holders, \$2.50; imported double-lock handcuffs, \$4.95; Mace small, \$4.50; large, \$8.45. In still other glass display cases are more items, including 36-inch riot batons weighing 28 ounces apiece.

Robinson buys a white cap, leaves, and, at exactly 2:15 p.m., arrives at headquarters to appear before the Complaint Review Panel, set up by the department to determine whether disciplinary verdicts (penalties amounting to suspension and forfeiture of pay) already handed down by the superintendent of police should be sustained or modified. After the charges are read to him, Robinson says, "Can I cross-examine everybody who participated in this investigation and who wrote reports on me?" The Department Advocate tells him no. "Can I have an opportunity to prepare a defense, since I didn't know what all of the charges were before I got here? And I didn't know all the information in the file until you just read it to me." The Department Advocate tells him no. The Department Advocate is acting in accordance with state law, a law Robinson intends to challenge in the courts. Now, Robinson shrugs and says, "Well, that makes it impossible for me to participate then."

"Then you're excused, officer," the DA says.

Robinson asks whether the board will make a decision anyway. The DA says yes. Again, he is acting in accordance with the law. "You're excused, officer," he says once more.

Robinson puts on his new white hat and goes out into the blowing Chicago afternoon.

At 6:35 p.m., Robinson goes off duty. For several hours he makes the rounds of sympathetic patrons to try to raise \$150 in overdue rent money for the league's storefront headquarters. Finally, at 11:30, he stops by the rectory at Holy Angels Church to talk with Father George Clements, the league's chaplain, and to pick up a movie projector for tomorrow's league meeting where he plans to show a film on organizational theory.

Robinson has called home twice during the evening to check on Annette. There have been more anonymous phone calls, but last fall it was worse. One day there were 27 anonymous calls in 12 hours. Another day the lives of his children were threatened. Father Clements got that call on Monday morning, when Brian, now 6, and young Renault, 7, were in class at Holy Angels Catholic School.

"We know the two Robinson children are in your school," the caller said. "We're going to blow their

heads off."

The party hung up, and at first Clements considered it a crank call. But then, from his rectory window, he looked across at the school and saw the office secretary run out of the building. He ran to meet her. She said a man had just telephoned the office, said he knew the Robinson children were at the school and knew their teachers' names and where they were sitting. He said he was going to blow their

A closet to scream in

heads off, and that he was a "fellow policeman."

Clements immediately called the district precinct. They told him a patrolman was assigned to the area and to get him. Clements couldn't find the patrolman, so he called the precinct again. "What are we going to do?" he asked. The desk sergeant told him: "We'll send a car around there later in the day." Clements next called Robinson's precinct. "Emergency," he said, and finally got the watch commander, who said that Robinson was down at the review board at a disciplinary hearing. The watch commander said he would notify Robinson and in the meanwhile would send a police car right over. The police car came and an officer took down the details, then left. A few minutes later Robinson himself arrived. He rushed into Clements' office. "Don't lie to me," he said. "Just tell me . . ."

"They're all right," Clements told him. Robinson broke down, and the next day made arrangements to send his children out of town for a while.

Now, Robinson mounts the last couple of stairs and enters Clements' second-floor quarters. The priest, a black man in his late 30s, is seated at his desk writing. His coat is off, he has on a black dickey and clerical collar. He greets Robinson by grasping his right hand in a thumb-locking black power handshake. On the wall nearby a sign says: "Soul Spoken Here."

"This has been a pretty good day for me," Robinson says. "A suspension, a disciplinary hearing and a bunch of threatening phone calls."

Robinson tosses his white hat into a chair. "Sometimes I wish I had a padded closet," he says. "I'd go in there and scream my head off. When I came out, I'd be cool again."

"You can use mine," Clements tells him. "It's sanctified."

"They couldn't stand for anybody—especially a policeman—to stand up and demand that the police be accountable to the people," Robinson says suddenly. "That we want *all* black policemen in the black community. That we shall be our brother's keeper. That we were tired of those corn-fed white bastards stomping around our community

being God." More and more Robinson has been angrily expressing such views publicly, alienating whites and increasing the league's credibility with blacks.

Clements listens, his hands folded atop the desk. He sighs deeply and the muscles in his jaw twitch and his mouth—which so resembles Malcolm X's—tightens and presses in on itself.

"I'm the president," Robinson is saying. "So I get most of the abuse. Most of the harassment. The transfers without explanation, the lousy assignments, the suspensions . . ." He looks up at Clements. "But you know that's not going to destroy us. That's not going to stop us from trying to turn the police department into something good, into something professional, something relevant to *all* people. If I go

down there'll be somebody else to step in."

"I know," Clements says. "I know."

It is well after midnight and Robinson finishes a beer and gets up to leave. Clements goes into an adjoining room and comes back carrying a large case containing the movie projector. He sets it down beside Robinson who is putting on his white hat.

"Take care of yourself," Clements says. "Go home and get some sleep."

Robinson picks up the projector. The weight of it seems to pull him back down. His eyes are moist. He shakes his head slowly. "Clem," he says, "would you believe I never meant to get so deeply involved?"

He turns abruptly and walks down the stairs and out of the rectory. ■