

A Police Desk Sergeant's Day Is 8 Hours of Other People's Trouble

Serves as Nerve Center for the Force

BY THOMAS CARVLIN

In the movies or on television, a citizen with a problem usually talks to a hard-boiled detective, a sharp lieutenant, or a crusading captain. But in real life, when you walk into a police station you are most likely to tell your woe to a desk sergeant.

Few authors write books about desk sergeants but Commissioner Timothy O'Connor, boss of the city's 9,000 man force, says, "The desk sergeant is the nerve center of the police department, the man who keeps things moving."

Blizzard of Work

In his usual 8 hour shift, the desk sergeant battles a blizzard of paper work, answers a deluge of phone calls, and talks with a parade of citizens. Each complaint involves a kink in someone's life, liberty, or pursuit of happiness which the desk sergeant must help straighten out.

"Outside of this, the desk sergeant hasn't a thing to do," O'Connor says.

If you walk into the Hyde Park station at 5233 Lake Park av. on his shift, you will talk with Sgt. Mark A. Waldron, a 24 year police veteran. Sgt. Waldron, 52, is typical of the men behind the desk in each of the city's 38 stations.

Sgt. Waldron's district, however, is livelier than most. Here is how Sgt. Waldron puts in his day as the 6th district's "nerve center." It's a sample from a recent Friday night.

Old Red Building

Sgt. Waldron's place of business is an aged red brick building, backed up against the Illinois Central railroad tracks. His first floor office is a 10 by 15 foot inclosure with a chest high, counter like "desk." Here he answers the phones, keeps the books, and meets the incoming public.

It is not yet 3:30 p. m. as Sgt. Waldron eases himself onto a high swivel chair behind the desk and gets a short briefing from his day shift predecessor about unfinished business.

The phones don't wait for him to get settled. His first puff on a newly lit cigar is interrupted by a jangle. He answers it:

"Hyde Park, Sgt. Waldron . . . disturbance with a gun? . . . at 4347 Berkeley? . . . O. K., who's the winner? . . . Cars 159 and 221? . . . O. K., and your number is 51425. . . Thanks."

Call from Central

This, he explains, is a call from the police central complaint room at 1121 S. State st., police headquarters.

A complainant has telephoned P O l i c e 5-1313 (the number everyone should use to call for police). He reports a disturbance involving a gun at 4347 Berkeley av. Two copies of the complaint are made at the central complaint room.

A radio operator gets one copy and dispatches cars 159 and 221 to the scene. A second copy goes to a "squad operator," who telephones the district. Sgt. Waldron takes the information, enters it in the station complaint book as No. 51425, and gives that number to the squad operator. Both have a permanent record of the complaint.

If the complainant comes into the station or phones the station, the process is reversed.

Fridays Are Busy

Sgt. Waldron's shift starts with complaint No. 51425. In the next eight hours, he will handle more than 50 such complaints. "This being Friday night," he says, "we will be a trifle busy."

On Friday night, it seems, the pursuit of happiness tends to veer from the straight and narrow. This produces 50 per cent more work than other nights for the district's 275 men and 20 vehicles.

The barometer of this activity is the station complaint book. It is the station's "diary," a permanent record of who does what and to whom among the more than 150,000 persons in the area from Cot-



Sgt. Mark A. Waldron at desk in Hyde Park station. Waldron, a 24 year police veteran, is typical of desk sergeants whom Commissioner O'Connor calls the nerve center of the police department. (TRIBUNE Photo)

tage Grove avenue to the lake and from 39th to 60th streets.

When the phone rings again, Sgt. Waldron learns from the squad operator that the "disturbance with a gun" was a false report.

"Car 221 got there first," he explains, "and found there was no gunplay, so they radioed to the radio room to give the other car a 'disregard.' That way, the other car doesn't go tearing over to the scene and risk a possible accident."

Phone Rings Again

Later, it turned out, a flat at the Berkeley address had been burglarized.

The phone rings again. "What's the trouble up there, lady?" Sgt. Waldron asks. "A fight? Second floor front. O. K., we'll send a squad up there right away."

He then calls the complaint room: "Investigate a disturbance at 4831 Lake Park av. Give that to car 101. The number is 51443."

Another phone call: A woman reports that kids are making too much noise at 55th street and Kenwood avenue.

Sgt. Waldron: "Lady, there is a circus over there tonight and there's bound to be some extra noise. But we'll send over a squad."

"We'll be getting a bunch of calls about 10:30 or 11 o'clock about kids lost or late coming home because of the circus," he prophesied after hanging up.

The phones halt and Lt. John T. Kelly comes to the desk to tell Sgt. Waldron he'll be going out to investigate a report there's a field of marijuana growing at the north end of the district. Detectives John Hughes and Bruce Jaffray go along.

Wants to Buy Bike

Sgt. Waldron answers the next call: "You want to know when you can buy a bicycle? All right, young man, I'll tell you. Got a piece of paper? O. K. You call Wabash 2-4747 and ask for the police custodian, he'll tell you when the next police auction will be held."

In the front door comes the first walking complainant of the evening.

"I lost my front license plate," says Thomas Jackson, 20, of 5529 Drexel blvd. "Let's see your identification papers," replies the sergeant.

Jackson pulls out a crumpled, oil stained registration certificate that is quickly given up as undecipherable. Sgt. Waldron sends Jackson's companion out to copy the license number from the car's remaining plate.

The number turns out to be 978-332. Jackson gets a receipt with which he can get a new plate from the secretary of state's office. The sergeant phones the license number to the stolen auto section. A teletype message will alert all districts to keep an eye out for the lost or stolen plate.

Auto Accident Now

The phones now begin to ring in duets. There are auto

duct, a pregnant woman posts \$15 for her husband. It is approaching 11:30 p. m. A woman calls to complain about a loud radio at 6006 Blackstone av. Sgt. Waldron dispatches a squad to reduce the offending decibels.

The money goes into the station safe. It will be sent to bond court in City hall in the

morning. More paper work. Patrolmen begin to drift into the station from their beats. One weary fellow calls

to the sergeant, "Is this where I give myself up?"

The sergeant briefs his successor on the midnight shift. Nothing is left hanging fire. It has, despite predictions, been a fairly peaceful night—no major shootings, robberies, or murders.

Sgt. Waldron lights a cigar and before he leaves he tells

how a "nerve center of the police department" keeps from becoming a nervous wreck on the job:

"It's a good job. I like my work. Sure, there are aggravations. But, what the heck, hasn't your job got rough spots? Hasn't any job?"

"I've been a cop 24 years and I like it. Being a desk ser-

geant is tough. But the main thing is to relax and not let it get you down. I try not to blow my top. Besides, this is a good station. We've got a good bunch of men and they make the job easier."

As he walks out the door to go home, a phone begins to ring. But that is someone else's problem.