

Witness: Lynne Owens

Statement No: 1

Exhibits Referred to: LO/1, LO/2, LO/3, LO/4, LO/5, LO/6,
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Royal wedding: the woman in charge of policing

Lynne Owens may be softly spoken but she has done some of the toughest roles in policing - and few come harder than running Friday's operation

Sandra Laville, crime correspondent
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Metropolitan police officers carry out security checks on drains and lamp posts along the Mall in central London before the royal wedding. Photograph: Anthony Devlin/PA

When asked to describe the proudest moments of her career Lynne Owens will talk of her time as a detective, when she investigated 10 murders, caught the 10 killers and saw them all given long sentences.

This time next week Owens will be hoping to have added another achievement to her record, with the successful execution of one of the biggest policing operations in the history of Scotland Yard.

Only the second woman to be appointed assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan police – a rank equivalent to chief constable – Owens, 42, is Scotland Yard's new head of public order policing, and her biggest challenge will come on 29 April when she runs the operation to police the royal wedding.

Almost 5,000 officers will be under her command on the day, including the Territorial Support Group (TSG), firearms teams and undercover units.

It is a high-profile role at a time when the Met's performance is under intense scrutiny. Owens must ensure that the tens of thousands of visitors to London, the 80 foreign dignitaries and the royal family can celebrate the day in safety while making sure that any direct action by groups of activists does not spill over into violent criminality.

At the same time Owens knows that any police action against anarchists who are threatening to disrupt the event has to be proportionate.

As the public face of the policing operation, Owens is softly spoken and measured, but in her career she has been in some of the toughest roles in policing. The daughter of a chief constable, she trained as a detective at Kent police, where she was promoted to detective chief inspector and led high-profile investigations within the major crime unit.

She trained as a firearms commander during her time at Surrey police, running several critical incidents and eventually becoming the country's youngest deputy chief constable before joining the Met in 2009.

She was promoted to assistant commissioner last December and put in charge of public order policing, firearms and uniformed operations.

"She is a woman who has been brought in from outside to the Met and put in charge of the TSG, who to be blunt have a reputation for being one of the most macho units in the police force. It's the stuff of a TV drama," said a criminal justice source.

Owens, who is married with a teenage daughter, has already introduced changes to the way the Met polices protest and major events. She has improved communications between the police and demonstrators by distributing leaflets at major protests to inform the public of what the police are doing and why. This was something which drew the praise of the joint parliamentary committee on human rights in their report on the policing of protest last month.

"She is a real breath of fresh air," said Jenny Jones, Green party member of the Metropolitan Police Authority. "She has very sensible ideas which frankly should have been brought in years ago in the Met. I am sure that some of these ideas might have met

some resistance. She faces a big test during the royal wedding and there will be lots of people watching her on the day."

One of the assistant commissioner's most significant innovations was to invite 120 observers from the civil rights group Liberty into the Met's control room and on to the streets during last month's TUC anti cuts demonstration.

In its report this week on the policing of the march, Liberty noted: "We received positive reports from observers of the police's restraint faced with some provocation," and that in "large measure" a proportionate approach was taken. What Liberty noted with dismay also, however, was that the policy of containment known as kettling was under almost constant consideration.

Shami Chakrabarti, director of Liberty, who had many dealings with Owens in the run-up to the march, said: "What I admire about her is her leadership style and what she is trying to bring to public order policing.

"You have to have confidence to listen to different points of view, to say yes we will talk about kettling, yes we will invite observers from Liberty, not only on to the street, but into the control room. It must have made a few people twitch but she achieved it and we did not find resistance or hostility.

"She is a team player, she does not want to be a politician, she wants to be a pretty straight forward law enforcement professional."

According to sources, what impressed the interview panel who promoted Owens to assistant commissioner was her clarity, determination and ability to assess a situation, decide a strategy and communicate it clearly.

All of those attributes are likely to be put to the test many times during the royal wedding.

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