

## Revealed: 'Evil empire' of corrupt police boss

Ray Mallon wants the public to be his judge and jury. But secret documents seen by David Rose detail the drug dealing, cover-ups and lies that made a mockery of 'zero tolerance' policing

The Observer, Sunday February 17, 2002

After weeks of surveillance and intelligence-gathering, the Cleveland Police Organised Crime Group were ready to make their move. Their target, Michael Richardson, was believed to be one of Teesside's most prolific drug dealers, turning over cocaine and heroin worth thousands of pounds each week. Not a user himself, he tried to avoid carrying drugs on his person, leaving his 'joeys' - addicted minions paid in fixes - to run the risks.

It was 1.30pm on 1 May 1997, and the police had been told by a reliable source that Richardson had had a recent delivery: inside his flat in the Middlesbrough suburb of Marton were substantial amounts of heroin. Eight officers smashed their way through the three mortice locks securing the front door, and while Richardson and two associates looked on, searched every inch of the property. They found nothing.

It wasn't poor intelligence which foiled the operation, but police corruption. Less than an hour before Richardson had his door kicked in, he received a phone call warning him what was about to happen. He used the time to seal the heroin in plastic and 'plug' it - hide it in his rectum. Later, the police discovered who gave him the tip-off - Brendon Whitehead, a serving detective in Middlesbrough CID, who has since been sacked.

The abortive raid on Richardson and the subsequent attempted cover-up formed just part of the case against Detective Superintendent Ray 'Robocop' Mallon, the flamboyant former Middlesbrough CID chief and arch-prophet of 'zero tolerance' policing, who was once held out as a national role model by the media, by the former Home Secretaries Michael Howard and Jack Straw, and by Tony Blair.

Last week, more than four years after being suspended from duty, Mallon pleaded guilty to 14 disciplinary charges, admitting that he repeatedly lied, deliberately withheld evidence from senior officers, and turned a blind eye to detectives who took and dealt hard drugs, and supplied them to vulnerable suspects in custody. Paul Acres, the Hertfordshire Chief Constable who presided over Mallon's police tribunal, ruled that no fewer than 11 charges were individually serious enough to require his resignation.

In a dramatic confrontation at Wednesday's meeting of the Cleveland Police Authority, Barry Shaw, the chief constable, looked a defiant Mallon directly in the eye as he publicly accused him of being at the centre of an 'empire of evil'. Mallon, he said, had done all in his power to try to suppress the truth, and had waged 'an unrelenting campaign to vilify those seeking justice'. Shaking with anger, Shaw quoted Ian Bynoe, deputy chairman of the independent Police Complaints Authority, who supervised the Mallon investigation. The charges he had admitted 'cannot be dismissed as the odd error of judgment or excusable mistake'. Instead, they were 'wholly incompatible with the standards required of even the most junior of police staff'.

Aware that any comment he made might be considered prejudicial, Shaw has waited since Mallon's suspension in November 1997 to have his say. At 61 he is Britain's oldest chief constable, and has delayed his retirement by at least two years, determined to conclude a case he views as a vital test for the future of ethical policing, and fearful that any successor might let the matter drop. Throughout that time he has endured attacks by Mallon's powerful allies: the Labour peer Lord MacKenzie of Framwellgate, a close personal friend of Mallon and the former chairman of the Police Superintendents' Association, who has claimed time and again that the allegations were 'trivial'; the MP for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland Ashok Kumar, who asked almost 50 parliamentary questions and demanded Shaw's resignation; some of his own officers; and numerous journalists in the local and national media.

The Observer has learnt that Mallon did not plead guilty once but twice. After first admitting the charges on 4 February, Acres ordered he return to the tribunal two days later and repeat the exercise, and provide a firm assurance that he offered his pleas as an unequivocal acceptance of guilt. In the privacy of the closed tribunal, Mallon meekly complied. In public, last week he proved his assurance had been worthless, telling reporters he was not really guilty at all. He had only pleaded guilty in order to be sacked, he claimed, so he could leave the police in time to stand in May as Middlesbrough's first elected mayor. Then, he insisted, the city's people would be his 'judge and jury'.

Despite its length, the details of Operation Lancet, the codename for the Mallon inquiry, have until today remained secret. However, The Observer has now seen hundreds of pages of documents compiled by the investigators, and can sketch its principal contours for the first time.

Ray Mallon moved to Middlesbrough in 1996, after a posting in Hartlepool widely considered a stunning success. With his gym-honed physique and sharp-shouldered suits, he was an exceptional motivator of staff, exhorting them to still greater efforts in the war against crime with the passion of a revivalist preacher. Mallon threw himself into the job with gusto. If he did not manage to cut crime by 20% in his first year, he told the media, he would resign.

Despite his evident enthusiasm, there was unease among his colleagues at one of his first acts. Two years earlier, a Middlesbrough detective had been transferred to uniform for acting improperly with one of his informants. Even before Mallon began his new posting, the man was earnestly lobbying him to allow him back in the CID. Mallon agreed, appointing him to a new 'intelligence unit'. That officer was Brendon Whitehead.

At Mallon's weekly motivational sessions, he used to praise Whitehead to his plainclothes and uniformed colleagues as a 'risk taker,' precisely the kind of officer Middlesbrough needed to get the desired results. In fact, as Mallon became increasingly aware, he was a reckless cocaine user, whose relationships with criminals went far beyond the proper legal boundaries governing contact between detectives and informants. Operation Lancet took several statements from officers and civilians who reported Whitehead taking drugs in local pubs, at least once snorting cocaine directly from the bar.

In March 1997, evidence surfaced that another detective - who cannot be named for legal reasons - had given a female prisoner heroin. On 23 May, still more serious claims emerged. Statements in the Lancet dossier describe how Whitehead and two colleagues took a prisoner, Peter Matthews, out of the police station for a drive. Matthews was a known heroin addict, who had been arrested for burglary and theft. The ostensible purpose of taking him out was to gather 'intelligence'.

Later, Matthews told Lancet what happened. Whitehead, he said, told him he was going to take him 'off station and buy me a pint and get me some gear. By this I mean heroin. When we left the police station DC Whitehead was driving the car, we went to a garage not far from the police station'. One of the other officers got out 'and said he was going for the gear ... we got to a pub somewhere. I had been given the gear, which I took.' He was taken inside the pub and given two pints of lager. In his drugged state, he was told to 'write something on official paper and I signed this. I believe it was admissions to offences.'

However, on this occasion, the detectives' behaviour was impossible to ignore. As Matthews was being led back to his cell, a uniformed officer spotted a cigarette packet in his shirt pocket. Inside were the remains of the heroin, and the rolled aluminium foil which he had used to smoke it inside the detectives' car.

An official inquiry began, but Mallon said nothing of the concerns he already had about Whitehead and his colleagues, and even arranged for one of the officers to visit the cells in the middle of the night and talk to Matthews again. A few days later he held a meeting for the CID. According to the Lancet dossier, he told Whitehead: 'The biggest thing you did wrong was getting caught.' Matthews, however, was a criminal, 'and no one would believe him'. He told the three detectives to say nothing.

The following week he held his regular motivational gathering. A uniformed PC, who like most of those present knew all about the discovery of Matthews's heroin, described Mallon's

speech: 'He stated he liked officers who were what he described as "troublemakers". He said if they had problems they were to go and see him and he would sort out their problems. He then singled out each of the three officers who had been involved with Matthews and got each to confirm his comments that he helped officers in times of trouble. I was flabbergasted.'

The raid on Michael Richardson was not the only major drugs operation foiled by a tip-off from Middlesbrough police station which came to light during Lancet. But the relationship which emerged between the trafficker and the CID was extraordinary. Here too Mallon has pleaded guilty to what amounts to a cynical cover-up. His role in this case became the trigger for his suspension.

It was 6 October 1997: in the wake of the Matthews case, Lancet was already under way, and suspicion over what had happened before Richardson's door went in was running high. A pale, thin, sobbing girl, aged 16, presented herself at the station, the supposed national centre of zero tolerance policing. She said that she had been brutally beaten and raped by her former boyfriend, Michael Richardson.

Over the next few hours, officers trained in coaxing statements from the victims of sexual assaults took down her harrowing story. As they did so, a parallel horror became apparent: that Richardson had been protected for months by at least two detectives. One of them, she said, was Whitehead, who had given Richardson a police-issue CS gas cannister to use against rival criminals; had taken cocaine with him; had bought heroin from him to give to prisoners in exchange for information; had arranged for addicts who owed Richardson money to be arrested; and had phoned him from the police station before the 1 May raid. She had been present, and had seen Richardson stuff the drugs into his anus.

The girl was plainly terrified. A uniformed inspector took charge of the case, and she told him 'she feared that if CID officers became involved their association with Richardson would result in his release'. Next morning, the inspector took her and her mother to see Mallon.

'Robocop' had been at the gym, and was dressed in a tracksuit; as the meeting began, he was towel-drying his hair. He listened to the girl's story with apparent sympathy. According to her statement, before she left his office, 'Mr Mallon took my hand and kissed it and said something like, "It's a pity Michael did not kiss you like that."'

Mallon's subsequent actions - all of which he has admitted - belied that inappropriately affectionate attitude. The uniformed inspector had drawn up a report, setting out the girl's allegations about Richardson's relationship with detectives, and recommending an immediate inquiry. Mallon sat beside him and scored out all the most incriminating details, ordering him to produce an alternative, diluted version. They did not need to be investigated, Mallon said, because they amounted merely to 'hearsay'. Unfortunately for Mallon, the inspector kept the original, and supplied it to Operation Lancet. As the

disciplinary tribunal was much later to comment, the deleted allegations 'were of a serious nature, well capable of investigation and [must be] viewed as a further attempt to thwart a proper investigation'.

Forced to stay silent by the rules of subjudice, Barry Shaw has not found the past 51 months easy. He has endured anonymous death threats, seemingly endless leaks to the media, and above all, further lies. For example, Mallon claimed repeatedly that he was never formally interviewed by Operation Lancet, protesting he was only too ready to answer all the allegations if only he were given a chance. In fact, he was interviewed twice, and on both occasions he exercised his right to make no comment.

'Zero tolerance sent a powerful message to the people of Teesside,' Shaw said yesterday, 'to people who badly needed hope and encouragement. That's why I endorsed it. But what happened was a total betrayal of what zero tolerance stood for. Custody areas should be among the safest places in the country. In Middlesbrough, they were a place where corrupt detectives supplied hard drugs. If one isn't prepared to tackle this kind of issue with whatever it takes, one shouldn't be a chief constable.'

Lancet uncovered many unpleasant facts. But there was one question, Shaw said, to which it had no answer. 'The thing I'll never know is why. If only he'd come to me and said, "Chief, I'm out of my depth here, I've got officers taking and supplying drugs, I may have made a few mistakes, I'm sorry and let's do something about it." Instead he stuck to his lies and cover-ups and fought and fought. Until quite a late stage he might have backed out of it. For whatever reason, he chose not to.'