

An Early Morning Run-in With the Third District Police

By Richard E. Prince

Whatever else may be said for the increase in the police force which now patrols the Nation's Capital with greater intensity than in any other American city, my own first, direct, prolonged brush with local law enforcement a few nights ago suggests to me that this saturation approach can be overdone. It began shortly after I and four friends—all of us young black newspaper reporters—started out by car from The Washington Post at 3 a.m. to look for a place to eat.

I was at the wheel, when we turned a corner at Vermont Avenue and suddenly I spotted the flashing red lights of a police van in the rear view mirror. We stopped and the policeman came to my door. "Yes, sir?", I said. He asked to see my driver's license and registration and I told him that I had left my wallet at home. He told me I had gone through a blinking red light without stopping, but that was the last I heard of the charge. For the next hour and a half the issue was my driver's license and registration.

The officer asked me to step outside and told me to put my hands up against the car. There were two policemen; one, Officer James H. Franklin, was white; the other, Officer D. A. Hunter, was black. Both looked to be under thirty. Officer Franklin reached into my pocket and pulled out a blue pen inscribed in white letters: "The Washington Post." I told the officer that some of the others in the car worked at The Post and would be glad to confirm my identification, but no attempt was made to ask them for confirmation or to call The Post.

Discussion followed as to whether I could go home to produce the license, or whether someone else could go to produce the license for me. Both suggestions were rejected by the officers, who said I would have to come to the third district substation to be booked and that one of my companions would have to drive the car there, following the van. (I was to find out later that day that a less-than-a-minute check to headquarters from the van could have verified my license.)

I was told to step into the back of the police van. With some apprehension then, I asked if I had to sit in the back of the van. "That's where all the customers sit," Officer Franklin responded cheerfully.

I stepped into the van and heard the door lock. There was no inside ornamentation, save for two long steel benches. I sat on one and quickly discovered that you begin to slide down the bench as the police

van takes off, if you don't brace yourself. The van is low-ceilinged and not very big, and the mesh wire window in the door and the bare steel everywhere else give one the sensation of being trapped in a fast-moving, uncomfortable cage.

My strategy, I decided, would be to avoid looking around the stark interior lest I succumb to claustrophobia. I hummed, chain-smoked, and braced myself to avoid falling to the steel floor when the van made a turn.

Suddenly we speeded up and I could tell the flashing light was on. I didn't know whether the flashing was standard procedure. I had no conception of where we were, since my only view of the outside world was through the mesh wire in the rear door and the van was moving so fast it was difficult to steal an outside look without being whiplashed to the floor.

Pretty soon we were on a major street (14th Street, I guessed). The van stopped and the officer-drivers got out. I could no longer see my friends trailing us in my car. All I could see was a multitude of



police cars. There was noise and commotion outside and the wailing of sirens. The police, I surmised, were trying to bring someone into the van. Now I could see a little. The man was apparently resisting.

I panicked at the thought that within minutes, they might bring this person into the van with me—a man who had done I didn't know what. Would he be handcuffed? Here was a new challenge to my equilibrium, and I stuck my foot in the van door before it could close and asked Officer Franklin if I could go to the station in a police car.

"Will you move back," responded the officer. "We're going to the Third District. There's nothing to worry about."

Abruptly the door was locked. And there was this young black dude squirming in pain at the other end of the van. His head was bowed; he was seated, his hands handcuffed behind him. "How did this happen?" he asked. "I was just taking a walk and they hit me over the head. They got to do this to the brother, them honkies." He squirmed back and forth, handcuffs still behind him, shirt torn. "Look at this cut, can you see, man? You see my face?" He had a swelling at what looked like a cut.

"What do you remember last?"

"Man, I don't remember nothing. All I feel is pain," he said. "You know, I'd give anything, man, to escape." I advised him to stick to the corner seat; the ride had already thrown my glasses from my eyes to the steel floor.

Finally, our journey was over, the door was being unlocked. I advised the man to be cool, and he urged me to be careful; that was the last I saw of him.

In the nine-by-twelve foot backroom of third district headquarters, first substation, at 5th Street and New York Avenue NW, Officer Johnson, a white policeman who was sitting at a long table next to the wall, asked me to sit down. "I'd rather stand; I've been sitting for a while," I mumbled. He asked that I repeat the statement and I did. "Well, I'd rather you sat down," he said. I sat, and after I realized that this, too, might be another long wait, I began writing down notes on the back of an abandoned prosecution report.

Officer Franklin finally arrived to make out the ticket, for going through a flashing red light. He asked my address and if I had any identification. I reminded him that my wallet was at home, but that I had some identification in my canvas bag, and he permitted me to get it from the car. "You got a gun in there?" the officer asked me as I reached in the bag, looking for anything with my name on it, and found a notebook. By this time, I was prepared to tell him I didn't consider the remark funny.

"What you got there?" he said, as he noticed—and took—the notes I had written. "You can't keep that, this is police department property. You could be charged with larceny from D.C. government," the blond-haired officer told me. "That's a \$500 fine, and you wouldn't want that, would you?"

The officer then observed that "you press people never drive with your licenses, do you?" I volunteered that I had offered to get the license, but the officer noted that the police department could not reasonably be expected to drive the twelve blocks from the scene to my home. He then took the identification and we returned to the stationhouse. There was another absence while he filled out the ticket and checked my license and registration over the Washington Area Law Enforcement (teletype) System (WALES).

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Meanwhile, Officer Franklin had given my notes to his partner, Officer Hunter, who began reading them with interest. "He's a newspaper reporter," said Officer Franklin as he left the backroom. "Oh, good, I like newspaper reporters," said Officer Hunter. "Look at this—this newspaper reporter wrote down everything you said, Johnson, you're going to be in the newspapers," said Officer Hunter. Officer Johnson laughed. "This is really blowing my mind," said Officer Hunter as he continued his reading of the notes sometimes aloud. Finally, he said, "Here, I can't make all this out," and gave them back to me.

I decided to see if I could view my friends in the waiting room outside, to avoid sitting in the chair any longer and walking in circles around the room. I checked the time, and it was about 3:45. I tiptoed outside, chatted for a quick minute as Officer Franklin spotted me. "You better get back on that chair, or I'll throw you in the cell block." I walked promptly back into the backroom.

After another wait, Officer Franklin finished the WALES check. He spotted the notes in my hand, and said, "You better let me have those." (Although Officer Hunter had returned them to me, that was of no apparent consequence.)

After he, too, paused to chuckle over my notes, Officer Franklin made out one ticket for driving without registration and another one for driving without carrying a license, and observed, "You see how inconvenient it is to be driving without your license?" By then it was 4:30 a.m. and I declined to reply.