Interview with Lieutenant General Gary Kruser, Deputy National Commissioner, South African Police Service

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In 2016 the South African Police Service announced that it was going 'Back-to-Basics'. To lead this programme, it established a new Management Interventions competency, headed by Lt Gen. Gary Kruser. In February 2017 Dr Johan Burger (ISS) sat down with Kruser to learn more about the new competency.

Johan Burger (JB): Who is Gary Kruser? Where do you come from? What makes you tick?

Gary Kruser (GK): I was born in Athlone, in Cape Town. It's surrounded by a lot of gangsterism and inequality. We grew up under the apartheid system, and we are primarily a coloured community.

What makes me tick is to ensure equality in South Africa, because I grew up around inequality – but also to ensure that basic living standards of people are at an acceptable level. In my youth I was involved with the ANC [African National Congress] and UDF [United Democratic Front] youth movements, where I fought to create a better life for all our people in South Africa. I think that being in the police helps me to continue trying to create a better life for people, because without a good professional police service it would be really difficult for this government to develop a better, equal society.

Once I joined the police I committed to ensuring the transformation and development of the police into a democratic police service. That's the commitment I made to myself and the pledge I signed to the people of South Africa. And I gave it my everything, long hours, studying, getting a degree in policing to equip myself for the job itself.

When I was younger I told myself I wanted to be a motor mechanic. It was not my dream to become a police officer. So my senior ranks and other achievements in the South African Police Service have all been a bonus for me.

JB: As deputy national commissioner you are responsible for national management interventions. How would you explain 'management interventions'?

GK: I always say that we are an internal consultancy. Normally when you have problems you get someone from outside to come and help. Now we use the expertise of the police to deal with those, we exist to deal with failures. The critical thing is we don't approach a problem on our own. We work with the affected office in finding solutions together. We go through a scientific process to see what we can repair immediately, and then do a bigger analysis and draw up a project plan or 'project intent' with timeframes, designations of responsibility, what to do and how to fix it.

JB: Let's look at the research division, which is under your supervision and something that is long overdue. How do you see its role?

GK: You are correct to say it is long overdue. We have tried through many attempts to get it off the ground. We have now established the structure led by Lt Gen. (Dr) Zulu, who I think is the correct person for the job and will do very well. We have gone through a whole process outlining what we want to do over the first six months. One of the first things we wanted to do is finalise the research agenda, because otherwise every week you are researching something new. So we have a research agenda which is adopted by everyone, including Parliament, setting out what we will do over the next five years, because research cannot be short term. We then prioritise what we have to do on that research agenda.

The second thing for me is to capacitate the research division adequately. I don't think we are where we would like to be, but we have to work with other institutions and universities to compensate where we lack capacity. I think there are sufficient resources outside the police.

One of the key things that we want to develop is a policing model that includes other government departments. We have gone through all the provinces and met with the generals and with all the departments and community members, and we will see where we go from here and what will come out of that.

The other thing that is very critical is the operational model which we established, the OCC. It is one of our highlights.

JB: What does OCC stand for?

GK: Operational Command Centre. We were initially given the job of trying to deal with the issue of gangsterism in Port Elizabeth, and we went in there with a six-month plan and with very clear objectives that we were going to arrest all the high flyers and reduce the number of murders and remove the use of drugs, and we achieved those things. We had an operation and took down 30-odd high flyers in one weekend. We achieved all the objectives we had set, which was very encouraging. Out of that practice we developed a whole new operational concept.

You don't have the capacity to deal with cross-boundary crime at station level. So we have divided the OCC concept into sections, and the first thing about the OCC concept is the level of accountability. The OCC develops high-level accountability on a daily basis, on a minute-to-minute basis.

Secondly, we will not stop crime but we need the ability to respond to it. With the old [operational] centres, something would happen and they would write a report and in the morning they would tell you what had happened. I've said that if something happens, something must be activated immediately. If it's a robbery, then the streets must be closed. There is a plan for everything, the tactical unit must move in.

The OCC also has an intelligence cell, a grouping that includes the Management Information Officer (MIO). All the people sit with information and it's processed every morning through the MIOs at the cluster level. The MIOs produce a product which is then given to the operational people, who must draw up plans and report back on a daily basis as to what happened in terms of execution.

JB: So in a way this either supports or replaces the crime threat analysis?

GK: No, those guys are still there. The station guys come every morning to the cluster, they sit together at 7 am with intelligence and they put together what happened during the night before. They pin it on the board and they sit as a collective, about 20 people in

a meeting. There they assess the threats, identify patterns, project the risk, and give those findings to the core command system, the operations people from all the stations, as well as the cluster operations commander. They then say, 'Yes, housebreaking from this time to this time,' and they deploy people there; or, 'here is an issue of gangsterism, we need patrols from 6–8 pm'. So they have a plan, and then they give it to the operational commander, who implements that plan.

The station then continues with normal duties. We have taken people from the station because we currently work with five to 10 people per shift. You can't do much with five people, but they are also wasted if they work normal shifts when there is nothing happening in the station area, and the problems are say from 8 pm to 3 am in the morning. But from 6 am they work, so we have taken away those shifts, we group them and now they are working according to the crime threat patterns of the cluster.

Initially there was big resistance from the station commissioners, saying we were taking their people. But what they found was that they went from red to green [in terms of the performance targets], so they are not complaining as much anymore and are quite positive.

We also have a detective desk at the cluster. Every morning all the dockets must be brought there. The detectives there check the A1 [first information of crime] statements and task the station detective heads with what they must fix. If you have a good A1 statement you are in a good place. And if a crime occurs across stations it will go to the cluster detectives to deal with, or they will advise the station detectives how to deal with that crime.

JB: How widespread is this?

GK: We only have it in one cluster.

JB: So it is still experimental?

GK: No, there is an ongoing validation process, and we will gradually expand this concept. We will start in Gauteng province soon.

JB: So this is a good example of what the British are looking at as evidence-based policing?

GK: At every crime scene we apply touch DNA, which is critical. Before, we used, for example, ballistic testing. We have an OCC person full-time, 24 hours a day, so when there is a crime which we think needs a crime scene team they are the first people dispatched. If there is a gun at the crime scene no one touches it. All those technical things are now dealt with at the cluster level so we can respond immediately. When they finish they immediately give packages telling detectives 'this guy shot', 'this person lives there', they give a photograph of the place, they get a Google Earth view and see the house. They put all of that in a package and they give it to the operational people, who must follow up.

JB: So if this works to your satisfaction and it is approved, the idea is to expand this throughout the country?

GK: Absolutely. I am convinced that it's working. And we can have operational command centres at the station, cluster and province, but with different functions. At some stage crimes are beyond a cluster and they must go to a provincial JOC [Joint Operational Centre]. The JOC does the very same thing but at a provincial level.

JB: Now the three regional commissioners, what precisely are they expected to do? And what is your role in this regard?

GK: We have taken a decision to identify the 30 worst performing stations per province. The three regional commissioners are to evaluate them and draw up a project for every station. Things they can repair immediately, for example that there is no electricity, generators are not

working, and there is no water. These are things they can fix. You would be surprised how many simple things they fix.

JB: So they have been successful so far?

GK: On those, yes. Then they have to deal with the internal functions of the police. The key focus initially was to check whether we are doing the things that we were supposed to do and are doing them correctly. How do we ensure that we deal with the issue of crime and operationalise the crime issue? We haven't done a proper analysis yet, but the crime rate has gone down in most places.

We also get a lot of ad hoc cases where the National Commissioner or Parliament or the Provincial Commissioners ask us to do something.

JB: These regional commissioners, are they based here at the head office?

GK: They are all at head office, and they each have a deputy provincial commissioner in the province that reports to them. So they have a team that sits in the provincial meetings, and then they have their own head office teams, which are sometimes sent to assist the provincial teams. Provincial teams normally do inspections regarding the implementation of the recommendations. We don't write reports, we have what we call the CAT (Computer Assessment Tool), and we revise it constantly. So you go to a particular station or office and if they say for example that they have morning meetings, they must obviously produce evidence of the minutes and you can then tick 'yes'. If no minutes of the meeting exist, then tick 'no'. Do they have community forum meetings? Bring your minutes and call the CPFs [Community Policing Forums], ask them how the meeting was. We get the review and give them a mark and an assessment of the state of the organisation. It really gives solutions to the problem.

When the team leaves the station they are able to immediately give a report to the provincial commissioner, the DPC [deputy provincial commissioner], the station commissioner, the regional commissioner and myself. While we wait for the final report, they will sit in and analyse it with the Management Intervention Analysis Centre (MIAC) and other people. They will look at the things they must do immediately, for example ensuring that a commander who requires further training is booked for a relevant course.

JB: Do you and your management group have regular meetings with your regional commissioners?

GK: I meet with them every week. The MIAC reports in terms of where they are, what they are supposed to be doing. They have to account because they give me a project plan of what they are going to do for the year, on a daily basis. Every morning they have to confirm that they were at particular stations. They report to the MIAC so that we can address the issues. If they say that in region C we are going to be at Bishop Lavis station, they must confirm that they are there at the beginning of the week and have a programme, so they have WhatsApp groups. We are developing all the time.

JB: Do you believe that that the regional commissioner system is justified, that it is working?

GK: Based on the feedback I am getting from the provinces, I believe that it's working. We will also do an impact analysis of some of the issues with the MIAC to measure what difference we have made. I think the station evaluation reports already teach the stations a lot. We are also growing and learning at the moment. I think we have made an impact, and crime is looking better in the areas where we intervened. I have no doubt that we must have made some contribution to that, but we won't claim everything. We hold hands, we don't leave

until the problem is solved. We don't write a report and say fix it. If they knew how to fix it, they wouldn't have had problems. So we stay with people sometimes for long periods. It's not always quick and easy, some projects extend over years.

JB: So, just a question again on this regional commissioner issue, obviously it's working. Anything that you think needs to be done to strengthen the system?

GK: We want to find a tool that can measure our impact and assessment better and we want to link it to the efficiency index and to crime, and to how communities respond as well. So the MIAC people are busy designing those things because when we started we knew that we had to go and fix things. But it is how we measure our success and outcomes – I think we are doing it our own way, but we want to improve on that issue itself.

JB: If you look at service delivery protests and at what is happening at universities, this is not a situation that the police created, but they have to go and police it. What do you see as the broad challenges for policing in South Africa at the moment?

GK: I think the key problems in our country are based on our social environment, if we look at the levels of unemployment, of homeless kids without parents, the social ills in the communities, domestic violence, rape in the family, etc. When you fail to prevent crime at a primary level, those things continue. I think the government as a whole needs to look at crime prevention holistically. We need proper housing, schooling, playing fields for communities, etc. While the government tries to do that, we are going to try and keep the lid on the pot; we have to deal with the consequences of these not being there.

Firstly, we have to correctly utilise the resources we have because while we don't have an abundance, we have enough. A second issue is accountability, for example, of station commissioners or a cluster commander. Thirdly, we need a stronger intelligence capacity to ensure that the operational members police according to a clear threat analysis and not by chance. Fourthly, we need to strengthen our detectives, because good effective detective work ensures prosecution and plays a critical role in crime prevention, and allows us to take out many repeat offenders. Finally, we have to increase our forensic ability. Part of our model is to use forensic evidence in crime scene management, which is going to make policing much easier, because someone always leaves some form of DNA behind. And with DNA we can also link someone to multiple crime scenes and previous crimes.

JB: There has been instability in this institution for almost two decades. It seems like there is, after a promising period, a return to instability, with senior generals on suspension, facing criminal charges, etc. There are also allegations against the acting national commissioner. Is this something that worries you? Something that can impact on the leadership of the police and the work you do?

GK: I think that any organisation needs stable leadership to ensure that we not only develop strategies but we implement them, and reach the target outcomes. We can only do that when we have stable leadership for at least five years. Without that you are constantly redeveloping strategies without implementing any of them. Stable leadership will ensure that you develop a strategy and you agree on it. The good thing about our provincial commissioners is that all of them are fairly new, so we should have stability at the provincial level for the next five years, and I think it will help take us forward. So we have a fairly young leadership, and with the correct guidance they can bring things to a higher level.

JB: If you were appointed national commissioner right now, what would you do to address the concern that you have just explained?

GK: I think that I am at a better place where I am. I think that my skill set and personality better suits the role I play here. I can support any national commissioner in achieving his or her objectives in ensuring that we make the police more professional. But as the collective, I think we need to stabilise the police by ensuring that we finalise our appointments [of commanders] and so forth, which creates a lot of uncertainty and unhappiness, and we let people focus on the work ahead. I think that we have a lot of committed police out there. If they are well led, they will do amazing things.

JB: You have come a long way and proved yourself. You are respected in many quarters, and you have become in many places the face of the police. So if the president calls you and asks you, 'General Kruser, I need you to fill that position,' would you not then consider it?

GK: I come from a culture where I have never applied for a position, and at the moment I have no ambition to be the national commissioner. If I had it my way, I would be retired already. I think that what I want for myself now is that I have given all my life to the country and I want to give something to myself. My son is now a grown-up and at varsity. There is also a lot of stuff that I want to do for myself, and for my mother. And I am not sure if having that job will give me the space to do all of those things, but I'll support anyone who takes it.

JB: Do you have any advice for all of those policemen and women you referred to earlier, who are honest, dedicated and hardworking, but may feel that they are not properly recognised?

GK: I know that things are difficult for members who have 20 to 30 years of service. And as an organisation I think that we have made a commitment to look into those things. So we have to get our HR [Human Resources] to rectify this, and get a better promotion system. But at the same time I think that most of these hard-working men and women in blue have answered the call of the job. My call to them is, while I know that there are frustrations and challenges in the organisation, the community out there requires them to remain committed and to continue delivering their service. If you keep on doing good work, you will be recognised, but if you really feel that you have been aggrieved, follow the grievance procedure. I think it's there to assist people.

I always say to my staff, we must separate the noise from the music, because sometimes there is a lot of noise. And if you listen to the noise then you lose focus. So it is better to listen to the music, dance to it and keep doing your work.