

INFILTRATED – THE POLICE FROM WITHIN, printed on May, 18, 2008, in **Folha de S.Paulo**

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In 2007, 151 police officers were murdered in the State of Rio de Janeiro, one every two days. Rio Police, on the other hand, killed 1330 people, a historic record, an average of 3.64 per day. Why do military police in Rio kill and die more than any other department in Brazil? And why are they so corrupt? Who are the people who daily risk death in exchange for the equivalent of \$450 USD each month?

In order to try and understand that phenomenon without filters, as no one had ever done in Brazil, I entered a public contest and joined the force undercover as a recruit, for a month, at the Soldiers' Training Course of Rio Military Police. I scored 67th place out of 25,000 candidates who tried out on June 3, 2007. After seven months of selection, I started training with the Second Company's first Platoon. The state only hired 752 new police officers, far less than the 2000 promised by the state's governor, Sergio Cabral. The new officers' graduation will be on August, 29. Rio Governor Sergio Cabral's promise, which was to have 2,000 extra soldiers on the streets until the end of 2007, was not fulfilled nor will be in 2008.

Welcome pressure

The sweat dropped from my face and slipped underneath the white shirt and down my legs, in jeans under the killing sun. At 10:45 in the morning, the temperature was already 33 degrees Celsius., in the middle of summer in Rio de Janeiro. The first test for recruits: standing on one's feet in military position, martially following commands to "hault" and "rest". This was the assignment for the top 450 recruits.

The other candidates and I, all 30 years or under and wearing military haircuts had been there for over two hours. We would be in formation or running from place to place until 2:30 P.M., without any food and with brief stops to drink water: seven hours under the sun, in jeans, t-shirts and tennis shoes.

At 8:15A.M., a candidate mumbles that he feels sick. He looks grey and is about to fall down. The rigid military position can cause dizziness, because the blood doesn't circulate properly. "Move only in case you fall", the Company commander would repeat many times. Two actually did fall, passing out at the training center soccer field.

Two hours later, I feel sick. Dizziness and nausea grow worse, I feel like puking. I raise my arm and fall out of formation, and supported by an MP I walk to the platoon headquarters. I wash my forehead and get better in minutes, sitting, by two other privates.

After asking me and making sure I am "really" recovered, an officer-candidate authorizes me to go back to formation – and to the sun. Almost 100 felt sick that day. "You didn't like it? Are you weak? Ask to leave!" The first days are of adaptation and pressure, an attempt to weed out the weak and determine those who actually want to stay. "Hey, those of you who came from the Armed Forces: there are no shots at watermelon here! It's about real combat here! No more watermelon shots!", a

commissioned officer shouts. Some get carried away. “I want to be mean, learn to be mean. What I know about the MP is to go into slums and wipe out criminals”, comments a student, former Navy non-commissioned officer with a classmate.

Hiding the uniform

At the end of the first day, outside the quarters, a young man approaches. “I’ll give you a piece of advice. Do not leave here in a white t-shirt, jeans, and military haircut. Everyone does. Bring a different shirt. Two or three have died like that, Including one in my class. Recruits are broke, a bunch of you on a bus, that haircut, it’s like a uniform: police officer.”

Paranoia is constant. Riding home in a car, three other recruits see a potential carjacker in every motorcycle rider. “Speed up! That’s a thug! Don’t give it a chance!”

Only 32 of the 151 officers killed in 2007 were on duty. Most of them – 79 percent — were off the clock and died from muggings (when found to be police officers or after they tried to react), fights or homicides. When recruits received their uniform excitement was obvious on their faces, but one commissioned officer gave them a warning: “What’s the need in taking the boots home? Will you be shining them on the weekend? It’s an unnecessary risk! I’m totally opposed to it, it’s dangerous. Why take them on the bus? You’re mostly from Rio, needless to explain much, huh? Do not take the uniform home!”

Despite the warning, the majority did ride home on the bus, to take pictures to later show to family and girlfriends. The question is how to hide the uniform and the police ID. In the car, should place it in the trunk, turned inside-out, or inside the backpack, under the backseat. On the bus, “pray a lot”, as suggested an instructor. “The police ID, slip it inside the regular ID. If shit hits the fan, throw it out of the bus window. Backpack, clothes, billfold... through the window.” Another instructor suggests buying a car. “Don’t walk or ride the bus, it’s real risky. Buses are sinister! Get your name in prayers, mãe-de-santo (“mother of saint”, African Brazilian religious woman leader), ask God to protect you.”

“You’re gonna die!”

A candidate talks about war scenes he saw on Discovery Channel. “A gun fight in Iraq, the guys behind a tank, shooting out of an automatic rifle, fucking firing, man! Blackhawk up in the air, tututututu, damn noisy, awesome!... I’ve even got goosebumps! The guy holding a .50, those goggles and eyes wide open... Oh, I wanted to be there!” He’s in such excitement that the others, squeezed in a modest health clinic, just listen in silence. “That one is a real soldier!”, one said. “I hate thugs to death! I hated them before and now I hate them even more!”

Violence and the fear of dying are in the souls of recruits, most of whom have relatives or friends in the police department. It is a clear impression that the MP do not accept corruption and crime by officers, but tolerate violence, including lethal violence.

“You get involved in a shooting with a thug in a favela. He surrenders. Will you arrest him? Fuck, no, I’m gonna kill (him)! Another one agrees. “Of course I’m gonna kill

him. The guy just hit a colleague, shot at me, but then gets cornered and surrenders. 'I turn myself in'? My ass 'I turn myself in'! You're gonna die!"

I argue it is illegal, that the police are supposed to arrest criminals, not to kill them. "Not killing is like raising an animal in a cage, waiting for him to attack you. Don't you know Brazilian Justice? The s.o.b. gets locked away for two years, then is out. If he sees you, he'll kill you. It is illegal, but that is the way it is."

The first one taps on my shoulder. "If you join the MP with that idea of 'arresting', you'd better start praying hard! Human rights for those who are human!"

I ask one student if he intends to have a handgun of his own. "Sure, will you kill with your MP gun?" Another one comments: "Will you feel good to kill? I will! And every criminal I wipe out, I'll thank God: Thank you, Lord, for sending me that thug!"

Rio de Janeiro police killed 1330 civilians in 2007. The average is 41,6 for each officer down, four times the internationally tolerated police/criminal average, 10/1. In the police instructors' opinion, it's Rio reality. "Shooting. Surround the criminal, he runs out of ammo. Machine gun him. That is routine. What are we supposed to do, anyway? Take him into custody? Well, I'm not saying that [one should kill], but... Everyone knows about themselves", a sergeant instructor says.

Classes vary from official correct instructions to personal comments." You can only use your weapon for self-defense. Cannot shoot from the back. Is it absurd? Yes, but you can't" a student says.. "The problem is the human rights groups."

My comrades ask an instructor if assassination scenes such as those shown in the movie "The Elite Squad" do happen [In 2007, the movie "The Elite Squad", about Bope, Rio MP Special Operations Unit, was a blockbuster in Brazil. It was also the recipient of Berlin Film Festival top award].

"Bope is MP like us. Shoot from behind and get caught... But do you have any doubt it happens here every day? You'll learn out there, in the streets: shot from behind, take the gun, put it in the guy's hand, shoot a round and plead self-defense. Perhaps I would do that, in the heat of the moment. But that is out there; here is no place to learn such things", explains an instructor.

Danger precedes the career. A young man lifts his shirt and exhibits a scar that cuts his chest and stomach down up to his navel. With a sinister smile, he tells how he almost died after being taken by criminals to a favela, with an MP friend. "The drug dealer shot my friend. I started running like crazy, and the guys shot me with assault rifles. I was hit twice, but kept running. I just stopped down there. I had been shot in the back and in the arm." He was in the hospital for 3 months. Every one stands still as they listen. "Didn't you keep the bullet", one asks. "What for? I kept the scar. The scar and the hatred in my heart. The crooks I get, I won't let go."

Holding a gun

Due to Rio violence, the police have adopted more aggressive proceedings when approaching suspects. "If you don't decrease the risk margin, you may not go back

home. Rio is the most dangerous State in Brazil, you can't do anything about it. It's the only one at war. If one's not ready, one will fall", says an officer-candidate. "Keep your gun pointed. Is it rude? Maybe. But the one who sits his ass down in the patrol car for 12 hours taking chances is the MP officer. Be courteous, but will you risk your ass at night?", echoes another one.

The corporation works hard on trying to change the generalized impression of truculence. "Will you slap the face of a guy at a routine car stop, yell at him? Do you need to do that? Will you point the assault rifle at his face? But you will point the gun toward him. Is it unpleasant? It might be, but your safety is more important."

One student asks if he should fire at someone who runs from a police approach. "Of course not. Some people get frightened. The MP should have 'alligators' [equipment to make wholes in tires] but we don't have those. You can't fire your weapon. Go after them. If you shoot, you'll have to justify why. In Complexo do Alemão [a 150,000-person favela, where the police killed 21 people in a one-day operation], seven or eight were shot in the back. Go explain to the judge later on!?"

Our first contact with a gun is with a .38 caliber revolver, and .380 pistol, the MP handgun. The instructor is a practical shot competitor. "MP shooting reality is no good, it's bad instead. I'm tired of watching officers with an unregistered Glock pistol at the waist: the mother fucker fires 19 rounds and the enemy keeps running away. He misses nine out of 10 steady shots. What's the use? It's better to have a .38 revolver and hit the target."

The MP is short of means. The use reloaded ammo, cheaper and "a potential problem". The guns are old, and shots, few, 120 (40 with each gun: revolver, pistol and assault rifle). Officers say one does not get to know a gun with less than 250 shots. "There are filthy guns. The old experienced MP officer will see you cleaning your pistol and say: 'You, private, get out of here!' They don't do any of that. If the gun doesn't work, you're gone."

In his opinion, the revolver is a good handgun, but not appropriate for Rio, because it has only six rounds and it's hard to reload, in a gun fight. "Don't give me that crap, 'if I can't handle it with six rounds, can't handle it anymore'. If I can't handle it with six, I will with 17. Otherwise I can handle it with 34, 68 rounds... I'll fire until it's over. Dying is the last option", he says, removing three ammo chargers from his pockets and two from his ankles.

Corruption

One candidate tells me, during the selection process, that he would serve in his brother's battalion. I ask him if the area, which has two favelas with powerful drug lords, is not dangerous. "Tsc, piece of cake. It's all settled. My brother makes USD 1,000 monthly there." From the drug lords? "From illegal transportation vans and commerce", he answered. That man was not hired due to a physical problem, but cases such as that worry the MP, which tries to indoctrinate their students against corruption and crime. The company commander warns us: "If you came here hoping to get rich, have a beach house, to wear lots of gold and drive brand new cars, you are at the wrong place. MP officers must live off their wages."

“It’s different out in the streets”

Students ponder, saying that “it’s different out in the streets”. “The old-timer sergeant gives you part of the bribe. Then you say: ‘No, no, sarge, I don’t want to take it’. He tells you: ‘Cut that shit, private, get that fuckin’ money! Give me a break!’”

Advice doesn’t always show results. “I wanna be a traffic policeman: good bucks”, one student smiles. “I don’t want the uniform, I want the MP ID. I’ll earn some money and go to Northeastern Brazil, says another one. Chances of wrong-doing are vast. “Does the MP give ammunition for our personal weapon?, someone questions. “The criminals give that to you. The ammo you apprehend at the favelas and don’t turn in”, teaches another.

Minor bribe

At the contest, two young men said they didn’t arrest anyone in the South Zone of Rio (the richest and touristy part of the city, by the beach). “When you get a mugger, we beat him hard. It’s easier to beat than to arrest. Take him to a hidden spot, you don’t want to do it in front of everyone. Arresting is a pain in the ass and requires a lot of work: you lose your whole day at the Police Department and don’t get to eat.”

Negative image

The first week, recruits were leaving the quarters when a young woman in a car shouted: “You, worms, scumbags! Scumbags!” Rio Military Police have a tense relationship with society. Officers resent “the society”. In their opinion, they don’t get enough credit from those for whom they risk their lives. “The population is rude. You’ll collaborate so rejection diminishes. It’s a cancer that we won’t change. Society only criticizes us. Criminals fire at will at favelas. An accidental shot hits someone. Who killed him or her? The MP!”, resents a sergeant.

An instructor complains, “The playboy gets stopped in his car and the first thing he does is: ‘How much is the coffee [bribe]? He gives a cop \$5 and when he leaves curses the officer: ‘Asshole, corrupt ass!’ What about him? Does the society have the police they deserve? Yes, they do!”