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Police Scotland's Deputy Chief Constable Malcolm Graham on "Operation Unicorn" Following the Death of Queen Elizabeth II

Because Queen Elizabeth died at Balmoral Castle in Scotland, Police Scotland played a central role in the ceremonies and other public events in the first days following her death on September 8. I spoke recently with Deputy Chief Constable Malcolm Graham about his agency's activities.

Chuck Wexler: *They call it Operation Unicorn, correct? And you are the strategic lead?*

Malcolm Graham: That's right. Operation Unicorn's the plan for activation if the monarch dies in Scotland. Then it links up with other elements of Operation London Bridge across the UK. I am the strategic lead in Scotland for the Bridge's planning, so I have overall strategic responsibility for delivery of Operation Unicorn on activation, reporting to the Chief Constable for Scotland.

Wexler: *Where were you when you were notified that her Majesty had died?*

Graham: I was at police headquarters with the rest of the command team in a strategic-level meeting. That meant that we were very quickly able to mobilize the plan because we had all the people that were a key part of the operation — people who had been planning it for many years — in the right place.

Wexler: *The planning for this eventuality had been in place for some time?*

Graham: Absolutely. I've been involved in the planning for Operation Unicorn and other scenarios under which Her Majesty might die for many, many years in different roles and responsibilities. Over the last four years I've been the strategic lead for the whole of Scotland, so we had a lot of time to gradually strengthen the plan, as we knew that the likelihood of us having to activate it was increasing. We tested certain elements of it — discreetly, of course, because there was a requirement not to do any of this in a way that would be undignified, disrespectful, or overly public.

There isn't any way we could have done something of this complexity, scale, and interagency-reliant basis without first doing detailed planning and committing a reasonable amount of resources on a full-time basis to make sure we would be able to perform the functions expected of us.

I don't think it was hugely unexpected that the Queen might die at Balmoral because she spent an awful lot of time there and an increasing amount over recent years. And because we had the responsibility, and in some respects the privilege, that we knew would come with Her Majesty dying in Scotland, we knew the eyes of the world would be on Scotland — and on Scottish police and the police service of Scotland — for a sustained period. During that time, we not only had to ensure the dignified, respectful, safe, and secure delivery of the Operation Unicorn plan, but also had to carry on policing the rest of Scotland, because everything else that normally happens didn't stop.

Wexler: *What were the major challenges you had expected to face in implementing Operation Unicorn?*

Graham: One major challenge that we predicted was the absence of notice. Another was the sheer scale and complexity and the number of people who would want to come out and show their respect — not

only their condolences for the Royal Family, but their appreciation for Her Majesty the Queen. We knew that managing that number of people on very short notice in several different places was going to require deploying a large number of officers on short notice and to a very high standard.

Another thing we predicted was the complexity of the multi-agency challenge. The policing operation clearly is a massive undertaking for local government, for national government, for emergency services, and the people actually organizing the different events.

As you're well aware, Chuck, it's been nearly 10 years since we created a National Police Service in Scotland. It has provided a fantastic opportunity to improve interagency coordination in Scotland and then with the rest of the UK, making sure that all the different functions and departments are increasingly joined up. The planning would have been much harder if we weren't in a national service in Scotland. For instance, the convoy arrangements for Her Majesty from Balmoral, which is in the north of the country, to Edinburgh were much easier to coordinate as a national service.

One thing I probably didn't predict was the sheer emotion involved, not only for the public but also what an emotional event it was for our officers and staff to be involved in. There was a huge sense of responsibility, and with that, some anxiety about what could go wrong because of the proximity of large numbers of the public with many of the most high-profile members of the Royal Family and other high-profile, protected individuals in very confined spaces at times. The Royal Family wants to be in contact with the communities that they are there to serve, which sometimes limited our ability to put in place all the measures that give you the greatest assurance in terms of security.

Everybody involved that I've spoken to — particularly police officers and staff — said they were really proud to be a part of this operation. I and other members of the senior team made sure that everybody in the organization understood the value of their contribution to the operation, including those that were to some extent left behind because they had to work extra shifts or work their rest days to maintain business-as-usual policing in other areas.

Wexler: *How long did the Queen's body remain in Scotland?*

Graham: It was a period of five days, and that was all built into the plan. There was a series of stages of moving Her Majesty's body from Balmoral to Edinburgh. She lay in rest in St. Giles Cathedral, where the public had the opportunity to come and pay respects. There was also series of other events.

During this period, Chief Constable Sir Iain Livingstone played a significant ceremonial role in various elements of the plan. He was part of the welcoming party for the new King on his arrival for the first time back in Scotland. He was part of a small group that took part in the Ceremony of the Keys, when the new King came to Holyrood Palace. He participated in the proclamation ceremony for the new king in Edinburgh. And he was a member of the official party to escort and say a final farewell to Her Majesty as her body left Scotland for the last time.

Wexler: *Did Police Scotland send officers to London to assist with activities there as well?*

Graham: Absolutely. Unlike some other police forces in England and Wales, we couldn't send anybody down until the day after the Queen had left Scotland, because we needed all those officers in Scotland. Some of these people were specialist officers, VIP protection officers, firearms support. But we also sent public order policing and general police officers for general policing duties.

The nature of the event in London was very different than what we had in Scotland. It was a massive event in terms of the number of members of the public and the number of events.

Wexler: *How do you think the average police officer felt about the Queen?*

Graham: Probably similar to the vast majority of members of the public, who had very strong admiration, respect, and affection for Her Majesty the Queen, not least because she showed an enduring resilience and commitment to providing some stability over our nation almost since the end of the Second World War. For all of us, that's something that's never changed during that period of our life.

As a personal reflection, her passing came at a time when there's a lot of uncertainty in the world — a lot of concern about the cost of living, energy prices, climate change, political polarization, and instability globally. That probably resulted in some of the emotional response to her death because of what the Queen stood for, in terms of ensuring stability. Now people are looking to what comes next with the King.

Wexler: *When you finish a major operation like this, is there any kind of debriefing, and will there be a report discussing lessons learned?*

Graham: Absolutely, we do that for everything we do, particularly something so significant. And as you know, there's always going to be lessons to learn about things we could do better that we can apply to any event.

We're finalizing the design and timescale for a rolling debriefing within Police Scotland. And that's going to link into an interagency debriefing structure, and hopefully we can link that up with debriefing amongst other policing partners at the UK level. We've had some early conversations about that. As to whether something will be published, I think it's likely some elements will.

We'll make sure our accountability bodies are involved in the debriefing process because transparency and accountability need to be built in. That's our model for everything we do. It's a model that supports our ambition to be a learning organization at its heart, which ultimately produces the highest level of public confidence.