

# WCO Diary

by WCO Mark Sweppenhiser



## “Why the Gun, Mister?”

When doing presentations you can always count on being outdone by the children in the audience. They ask the most poignant questions without trepidation, and they can usually beat us “old fogies” to any punchline. This is where “the question” sometimes follows. Recently, during a presentation I was asked why conservation officers carry a gun. The young man continued to ask, “Don’t you just stock fish?” A genuine question asked by a fine young man who eagerly waited to hear my response. The group took a subtle lean forward intently listening to my response, eyes glued to every piece of my pressed, polished uniform. I had their attention.

When asked this question, many WCOs just smile and offer a polite response like, “because I’m a sworn officer dedicated to the protection of the boating public and the protection of our state’s aquatic resources.” I can understand the question because for many people their only encounter with a WCO may be at a trout stocking.

The term “waterways conservation officer” conjures up a peaceful image of a nature-filled day. This is so because our job is mainly outdoors. However, this is where the similarities end. A WCO’s day is filled with personal interactions such as making professional contacts, assisting other departments on overlapping investigations, conducting public presentations, educating, fish stocking, patrolling, investigating, addressing complaints, citing violations and arresting when necessary. Sounds like a day of any other police officer in any other department?

One caveat, though: The work of a WCO is often conducted alone. This work is often in remote parts of the countryside, along city waterfronts or in the middle of a waterway with little or no assistance readily available. Some of the same individuals who have extensive criminal histories with other law enforcement departments continue their disregard for the law when they bring their illegal enter-

prises to the woods or city waterfronts.

Furthermore, since September 11, we as a society have become more aware of our sensitivity to terrorism. Much of our most important infrastructure is along our waterways: Nuclear power plants, hydroelectric dams, drinking water intakes, sewer treatment plants as well as most of our most populous boroughs and cities. WCOs are another set of eyes and ears in this struggle.

Years ago a debate over whether to wear a gun belt during a presentation would have generated a lot of discussion. Nonetheless, in a world of random gun violence, as a sworn officer it is our responsibility to be prepared and to protect. People, especially children, should see an officer in a presentation the way they would see them dressed on the street, along a stream or on a boat. This department in many ways may allow young people to view the officer as reassuring and approachable. Moreover, this appearance may lessen any intimidation they may feel when they see an officer on patrol in the same full duty attire.

It is all about the people. WCOs protect through patrolling, conducting investigations, performing arrests and prosecuting those who would harm others on the water and damage our resources. I never had a complaint from a fish. I’ve never been assaulted verbally or physically by salamanders, snakes or skinks. I’ve never seen a turtle dump corporate or household trash. Thus, my job is to protect, conserve and enhance the Commonwealth’s aquatic resources from us, the people—if this can be done many times nature will take care of itself. ☐



*Why the gun? WCOs often work alone and at night. Much of our vital infrastructure is on or near our waterways. WCOs are another set of eyes and ears in the struggle against terrorism.*