

Deputy Commissioner Lyn Provost
Opening Address to "in the right hands" Seminar
Christchurch 22 February 2006

Chairman, ladies and gentlemen
Kia ora
Haere mai
welcome.

I would like to particularly acknowledge Mr Ishiguri, who is the head of the United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament, in Asia and the Pacific. Mr Ishiguri has travelled from New York, where he is based. It is a great honour to have you here Mr Ishiguri - konichiwa. Your presence provides a significant endorsement of the importance of this seminar.

I also acknowledge and thank the organisers, the New Zealand Mountain Safety Council, the New Zealand Council of Licensed Firearms Owners, and my own organisation, the New Zealand Police.

I am pleased, but a little daunted, to be providing the opening address to this seminar, aptly named "in the right hands". Safety is very dear to my heart, but firearms are not my area of expertise.

Safety is also, of course, central to New Zealand Police's strategy, hence our motto of "Safer Communities Together".

Thus, I have decided to speak, not only as Deputy Commissioner, but as a wife, mother of two teenagers, friend and citizen of New Zealand and the Pacific.

First, I want to touch on the subject from my perspective as Deputy Commissioner of New Zealand Police.

Firearms and their use or misuse touch on policing in several ways. They are the most lethal use of force tactical option that we can call on in order to protect lives. Their misuse by a small number of people can generate very costly criminal investigations - costly both in dollar terms and social consequences. On the other hand, firearms licensing and the administration of the Firearms Act is core business for our organisation as we strive to give effect to legislation aimed at maintaining safe and responsible firearms use.

New Zealand is the ideal place to have an International Firearm Safety Seminar. Our rural environment provides many opportunities for recreational shooting, those who work on the land need firearms as a tool of trade and we are very proud of the attainment of our sports shooters in Olympic and Commonwealth events (with more honours to come next month, hopefully!)

We're also incredibly fortunate to have had very few multiple homicides involving firearms, but there are also examples of incidents and situations, below the homicide threshold, which underscore that a firearm in the wrong hands can be an instrument of violence without a shot being fired in the direction of a victim.

Sir Thomas Thorpe in his report in the 1990s talked about a rural woman whose partner would clean the gun during domestic disputes.

But generally, the scarce nature of catastrophic mass murder incidents involving firearms has meant that the public clamour for what enthusiasts might suggest could be draconian legislation has been relatively muted in this country. It has given us the opportunity to watch and assess what other jurisdictions have done, or attempted to do, in the fields of licensing and registration.

The strong partnerships that exist between the Police and groups like the New Zealand Mountain Safety Council and the New Zealand Council of Licensed Firearms Owners have helped foster an environment where there is an emphasis on safety education as a means of maintaining firearms "in the right hands".

We're not claiming we have it completely right here. Chasing non-responders, enforcement and delivering efficient and effective licensing renewal do not come without their own sets of grumbles. But I can assure you, New Zealand Police remains committed to enhancing firearm safety, through ongoing review of our own processes and procedures, and through ongoing relationship building with all the key stakeholders.

Now, I'm going to move on, as your organisers requested, to some reflections from Lyn Provost, the person.

I'm going to tell you the stories of three women; Jane, the colleague and friend; Janet, the nurse and champion; and the unnamed Pacific mother. Through these three people, I hope to set the scene for this seminar.

Story 1

Jane, born and bred in the South Island; an accountant, like me; married, like me; two teenagers, like me. Unlike me - about 15 years ago, Jane's husband shot and killed her, then took his own life. Losing a friend and colleague was hard, but what had been just as hard were the conversations about her fear of him with guns, and the apparent inability of anyone to do anything to prevent the impending tragedy.

I am told that Jane's death was one of the catalysts for changes to the arms and domestic violence legislation in the early 1990's and I understand that some of the presentations will provide evidence of the positive impact of these changes.

Thought 1

Firearms in the "wrong hands" can be tragic and engender fear for our safety above and beyond the single event. But the legislative changes resulting from such tragedy can be effective. Legislation, however, is not enough by itself.

Story 2

Janet is a nurse and, together with her husband and children, is heavily involved in competitive shooting. In this family, sensible use and storage of firearms is as inherent for them as care in the use of a stove is for the rest of us. I suspect that, while my kids recited nursery rhymes, Janet's kids recited the New Zealand Firearms Safety Code.

Thought 2

Firearms "in the right hands" still need people to ongoingly demonstrate, engender and educate those around them on the responsible and safe use of firearms.

Story 3

An unnamed mother stands on an idyllic Solomon Islands beach and implores a New Zealand police officer to find her son, shot on those shores at the height of civil tension.

Her story touched the hearts of New Zealand Police on deployment in the Solomons.

Whilst this story lies at the extreme of firearms in the Pacific, I am certainly aware that it is not uncommon for old firearms and ammunition to be located in the islands. Their safe use is an issue of some significance to us all.

Thought 3

Firearms in the "right" or "wrong" hands are the reality of most islands in the Pacific. There are lessons we can and should learn. In particular, we need to address firearm safety and training for civilian firearms in Pacific States, a need identified at the UN Conference on Small Arms in the Pacific held in Nadi in August 2004.

Your seminar objectives and the programme explore aspects of these three women's stories. You will be addressed by speakers of high quality and international reputation. I encourage you to continue the research, promotion, participation and exchange of ideas on firearms safety. I challenge you to always encourage responsible and safe behaviour in the use of firearms. Safety is important to us all, individually and collectively.

I wish you well.

Thank you.