



Final Four 2011: VCU Police Use Bicycle Teams to Quell Riots

by Kyle Frail, PCI # 1238

Virginia Commonwealth University Police Department

Before March Madness 2011, many across the country had never even heard of Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), an urban campus located in the heart of Richmond City. It has a diverse student population of approximately 32,000. Virginia Commonwealth University's basketball team began its improbable run as one of the "First Four," having to beat USC to make it into the major part of the tournament. Many ESPN sports analysts were very skeptical that VCU should have made it that far. The team used this negative commentary as fuel for a fire that pushed them through the tournament. They soundly beat their competitors, first USC, then Georgetown, Purdue, Florida State, and Kansas. They finally took a loss in the "Final Four" to Butler University.

The first riot occurred when VCU beat Florida State to make it to the "Elite Eight." Thousands of students unexpectedly marched into the streets in and around the VCU campus, celebrating the victory by dancing in the streets and on top of vehicles. Fans and onlookers came from not only the dorms and student housing, but also from the adjacent Fan area, where many families and alumni reside. VCU Police and Richmond Police were able to handle this impromptu riot, which resulted in only minor damages and no injuries. A few days later, when VCU had a huge upset over #1 seed Kansas, VCU Police, Richmond Police, and State Police were prepared, with Crowd Management Teams (CMTs) on standby. This time, a very peaceful crowd was guided to Monroe Park, a public park on campus, where the celebration continued. No chemical agents were deployed and no arrests were made.

Prior to the match between Virginia Commonwealth University and Butler University on Saturday, April 2nd, 2011, intelligence gathered from various social networks indicated that thousands of people were planning to storm the streets, regardless of the game's outcome. Multiple agencies were put on alert and an action plan was developed. Virginia State Police, Richmond Police, VCU Police, Virginia Capitol Police, Richmond Fire Department, and Richmond Ambulance Authority were all prepared for the inevitable chaos that would ensue after the game. A Command Post was set up at Richmond Police Headquarters, outside of the target area, to assist with deployment and communication.

VCU Police deployed 10 IPMBA-certified bike officers. These two-man teams were originally designated to certain sectors and later deployed to specific problem areas. The officers were individually equipped with department-issued Fuji Police Bikes and outfitted with police lights, bike helmet, gas mask and carrier, as well as a full duty belt and radio set on a Richmond City Special Operations Channel.

When the game ended, I was posted outside of the VCU Siegel Center, where a small crowd had gathered to watch the game. As anticipated, an initially peaceful crowd of thousands of people gathered on West Broad Street. This soon changed when a few "bad apples" began starting fires and lighting mortar fireworks off in the middle of the crowd. The Crowd Management Team (CMT) was then ordered to standby, surrounding the crowd. The unruly crowd began to escalate the damage it was causing, as well as develop an uneasy attitude towards the police. They began tearing down street signs and destroying anything they could get their hands on.

The CMT began moving the crowd with minimal force to the designated public park. However, the crowd turned violent, throwing bottles, bricks, rocks, and shooting fireworks at the officers. The bike officers assembled behind the CMT's shields for protection. Lacking a riot shield or riot helmet, I found myself



side stepping and dodging projectiles being thrown in my direction. Smoke was deployed, but it did not disperse the crowd. In fact, I witnessed several individuals attempt to pick up the smoke canisters and throw or kick them back at police.

State Police were close enough that they were able to put their paint ball guns to use releasing rounds of pepper balls in close proximity to the crowd. As a result, members of the crowd ceased their attempts to pick up the smoke canisters and direct them back at the police. Minutes later, the call was made for all units to don their gas masks in preparation for the deployment of CS gas. Shortly thereafter, CS gas filled the atmosphere. This encouraged the majority of the crowd break up, and once that occurred, the CMT line again started forcing the crowd down the street toward Monroe Park. Bike officers were then deployed to contain small groups of people that had begun congregating behind the CMTs. These people were corralled towards a side street or alley and directed away from the backs of the officers. Once those groups left the area, the bike officers formed behind the CMT to assist with pushing the major part of the crowd.

During the push of the large crowd, two bike officers were dealing with a group of people cornered between portions of the Crowd Management Team when one of the officers in the CMT deployed his OC fogger without direct communication to the bike officers. Mass panic broke out, and part of the crowd stampeded out of the immediate area. During this panic, the bike officers were grabbed by the members of the CMT and pulled behind the line, leaving their bicycles on the other side of a line of vehicles. One of the officer's bikes was taken by a juvenile, who was apprehended shortly thereafter.

After the crowd passed the dormitory area en route to the open public park, bike officers were deployed to the patio of the dorms to again corral students that had gathered in the area. There were approximately 75-100 people on the patio watching the riot start to die down as a result of the police action. These bike officers used their bikes to make a line to keep these students on the patio and prevent them from possibly coming up behind the Crowd Management Team and causing more disturbances. Again, some of the bike units were posted at alley entrances to direct foot traffic away from the area.

When the crowd had been fully dispersed, bike officers were assigned the duty of documenting any damage in their sectors. This was done much more efficiently on bike than it could have been by officers on foot or in vehicles. Those bike officers quickly assessed the little damage to a few business fronts and recorded some minor fire damage.

After everything was over, I thought it was a great multi-agency success. I would like to thank the Virginia State Police, Richmond Police, Capitol Police, Richmond Fire, and Richmond Ambulance Authority for their invaluable help.

It was the perfect time to be a police cyclist and a very unusual event to work on bike. The police cyclists played a vital role in the success of the event due to the quick mobility of the bicycles. If those officers had been on foot or in vehicles, response time to certain parts of the campus would have been much longer. If the bike officers had not been there, it is likely that groups would have formed behind the Crowd Management Teams, and they would have been surrounded with hostile individuals. This event has given me even more respect for the efficiency of police cyclists and how police bike officers can be used in a multitude of ways.

Officer Kyle Frail has been with the VCU Police Department for the last three years as a patrol officer and is currently assigned to the Special Operations Unit. He earned his IPMBA Police Cyclist Instructor status at the 21st IPMBA Conference held in the City of Richmond. He can be reached at frailkr@vcu.edu.

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