



Traffic Stops: An Essential Function of Bike Patrol

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Recent incidents across the country have called into question the safety of making traffic stops on bikes. The focus of this article is to offer some practical advice for training, policy, and making traffic stops on bikes to ensure that officer safety is upheld without sacrificing efficiency and capability.

I saw the need for this first hand when a vehicle fled a stop and nearly struck five bike patrol officers head-on as they were riding up the street towards the scene of a traffic stop. Fortunately, they were able to get out of the way. Nevertheless, this incident led to a temporary ban on all traffic enforcement by our bike patrols. Because the patrols were being used in high crime areas on a proactive enforcement detail known as Operation Impact, this restriction, if not lifted, would effectively eliminate their use.

During two meetings with my Captain and Major, I detailed the training delivered in the IPMBA Police Cyclist (PC) Course, provided copies of the lecture outline for Chapter 18 of *The Complete Guide to Public Safety Cycling*, and discussed the guidelines for traffic stops. I also provided a detailed memo describing our training, in-service training, supervision, equipment, and operating guidelines.

With this information, and with the strong backing of my Captain, the Major agreed to allow the bikes to continue to operate as they had been. Nevertheless, the incident helped me recognize that, as instructors and/or bike unit supervisors, the safety of cops on bikes is completely in our hands.

In recent years, the number of bike patrols has been increasing. As more cops patrol on bikes, more traffic stops are going to be conducted, and more traffic stops are going to go bad. It's the nature of police work. When it happens, there will not only be questions from the media, but you can be sure there will be plenty of questions from the command staff.

On a bike or in a car, a traffic stop is inherently risky. Officers and cars are struck far too often, and with the rapid expansion of bike patrols, we see this trend with bike officers as well. The problem is compounded with bike patrols, however, since many officers and command staff personnel are unfamiliar with this tactic and are unaware of the versatility of bikes.

I have focused on several aspects since the incident which nearly shut down our bike patrol unit. These are some basic concepts that are important for all bike officers to fully comprehend.

Initial and Continuous Training

The IPMBA PC Course packs an awful lot of information and skills into 32 or 40 hours. Even those instructors who conduct 40 hour courses often still run short on time. Without an "FTO" program for bike officers, trainees complete the program and are then put out on the street, often without the benefit of a seasoned bike officer to guide them. Therefore, bike education must not



stop once the officers are out of the classroom.

After starting bike patrol in the City of Rochester, a couple of my guys said, “there is a big learning curve when you get out there. Practicing a traffic stop in class and doing it on the street don’t compare, and you have to make some of it up as you go along.” Because every stop or encounter presents its own challenges and circumstances, techniques learned in the classroom must be adapted to fit the environment, sometimes in ways we cannot anticipate.

Due to the nature of our assignments, we work in groups of four or more, and, as two Instructor Trainers from the D.C. area recently found out, some of my guys have immense creativity once they are out on the street. For example, all encounters and traffic stops have contact and cover officers, but we also employ something we call – not facetiously – a “sniper watch.” One bike officer takes a position in the shadows far enough away to get a good view of the area, and watches for people moving towards the officers, drive-bys checking us out, and any other potential threats. This has proven useful in gathering intel and preventing problems during the stop.

A variation of that tactic is what we now term “overwatch.” While other cars are at a scene, especially volatile incidents, the bike patrols take up positions in key locations well out of sight of the bad guys or anyone helping them. Some are designated as “overwatch/sniper watch” for the officers at the scene, while others are positioned to spot anyone trying to sneak through the perimeter. I’ve seen this work not only for finding bad guys, but also for collecting intel, as the bike officers often overhear people who, unaware of their presence, talk about the incident.

These were “street school” lessons they learned. After they shared them with me, I thought, “Great idea. Why didn’t I think of that?” Instructors, supervisors, and veteran bike patrol officers – keep an open mind. If you are a bike unit supervisor, let your guys be a little creative – they will surprise you with what they can do.

Also, discuss with newer bike officers techniques that will make their next encounter safer. This is something that we have incorporated into our nightly patrol. After each stop, if warranted, we discuss any issues and make any necessary adjustments.

This sounds time-consuming, but in reality it usually takes about 30 seconds. These learning/teaching opportunities are a great way to facilitate the continuous training/field supervision portion of a supervisor’s duties.

For bike unit supervisors of any rank, documenting these actions pays off big in the end. If an incident occurs, such as the one noted earlier, you’re going to be called “on the carpet.” With documentation from both the PC Course and ongoing training, you can easily show that the bike patrols are operating in accordance with established standards and departmental guidelines.

If you can, go on patrol. I am fortunate that I am able to ride with the patrols about once a week, which enables me to assess their performance and provide additional safety advice. On the nights that I don’t ride, I still have regular contact with them. This communication and documentation, combined with my first-hand knowledge of what was happening on the street, is what ultimately saved our bikes.



Traffic Stops

There are so many variations and configurations of streets and traffic patterns that I can only speak in generalities and relay the methods we have adopted. Several of these tactics were developed after our close call.

Many of our traffic stops are generated by simply riding up to, or by, cars stopping or stopped at traffic lights or stop signs. Although it seems much safer because the cars are stopped, the driver can still turn into you if you ride up alongside the car. Stay in the “safety zone” on either side of the car, adjacent to and behind the rear axle. If the driver makes a hard turn in either direction, you will avoid being struck.

Something else that we discovered during our patrols is that most traffic stops are not initiated from behind the vehicle, but rather from the front (oncoming traffic) or side (vehicles on side streets waiting to turn). The bike officers see far more traffic coming at them or making turns than they do riding up behind cars. This necessitates getting the driver’s attention from a safe position and telling them to pull over. Once that happens, the officers position themselves properly to approach the vehicle. This is another area where real life experience counts.

During the Operation Impact details, we have about thirty troopers and officers working in a designated area. All the bike patrols are designated with a specific radio ID number, and there are two cars assigned as support for the bikes. These cars will assist during traffic stops and arrests by lighting up the scene and positioning themselves behind the suspect vehicle, allowing the bike patrols access to computers for records checks and paperwork. They also provide a place to secure suspects and a way to transport them. This has worked very well for us, and when a bike patrol calls out with a stop, there are always several cars backing them up.

The bikes have proven so useful for traffic enforcement that it is difficult to ride from the office to the target area without getting involved in an arrest within the first five minutes. There have been many arrests during this casual ride, as pedaling down any city street allows our officers to see, hear, and smell everything.

Overcoming Safety Concerns

Many of the safety concerns we encounter on patrol are addressed in the PC Course and come into play nearly every night. They include, but definitely are not limited to:

Danger from traffic – If possible, direct the driver into a parking lot or onto a side street.

Because of the traffic volume on many streets in our target area, the officers often make the initial stop, get ID’s, then direct the operator to a parking lot or side street to get out of traffic.

Lack of cover/concealment – Be aware of your surroundings and available cover.

Vehicle flight – Put out a description over the radio.

Multiple occupants in a vehicle – There are always at least four or five bikes riding together. A passenger side approach is used and, as the occupants’ attention is focused on that side, another officer approaches the driver’s side, often in stealth mode. This divides the attention of those in the car and throws them off balance if they were planning something. This tactic is not used on a routine basis, and when it is, the timing and positioning of the contact/cover officers is clearly



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communicated before the initial approach. There are obvious safety issues to consider, but they can be overcome by preplanning, communication, and proper positioning by all officers.

Visibility – We use the NiteRider Digital Patrol light with matching taillight. We also have large reflective decals on both sides of the top tube and down tube. Reflective tape (same as on the troop cars) is wrapped around both sides of the rear rack support arms, the side of each seat stay, and each leg of the fork. We use the Patrol Cycle shoe, which has a large reflective patch on the heel, and Bratwear uniform shirts with reflective stripes around the sleeves and a large reflective “State Trooper” panel on the back. Even with all that, our guys can stealth with the best of them. But when you are looking for them, just a little light pinpoints their location quickly.

Riding up to occupied parked cars – Keep your distance and treat them like regular traffic stops. I noticed that because the car was already stopped, the bike patrols were riding closer to the car before dismounting. This left the bikes too close and turned them into obstacles in case they had to retreat. This was part of the learning curve and will be addressed in future PC Courses.

Supervision – If at all possible, bike unit supervisors need to ride with their officers. They need to watch how the officers work, ride, position themselves, make traffic stops, and approach vehicles and people, and make any appropriate changes. Not only does this reinforce established safety guidelines, it also gives the supervisor firsthand knowledge of exactly how the patrol operates and its capabilities. When questioned by command staff, the supervisor will be well-equipped with answers.

Bike Unit Policies

An established policy for a bike patrol unit is crucial. I was fortunate to have some input as to the content of our bike patrol policy, which was recently updated. With sections on objectives, bike patrol member qualifications, how to apply for the detail, training information, bikes and accessories, protective equipment, uniform, equipment maintenance, and patrol operations, we feel that the new policy is much clearer and more useful than the previous one.

The basis for these policies is well-established by IPMBA and the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), who jointly developed a *Model Policy for Bicycle Patrols* in 2004. Using this as a template will help in developing an overall policy for your agency. As with any policy, though, it does not cover every aspect of bike patrols and allows for crucial “street school” creativity that can lead to safer and more effective practices.

If you are in a position to do so, I recommend that you help establish a policy for your agency. Having such a policy not only gives your officers guidelines to work by, but also shows that bicycles are as legitimate a police tool as cars, motorcycles and horses. Having such established policies – and training to them – ensures that everybody is operating the same way and also helps protect the officer from the inevitable citizen complaint.

Traffic stops for bike patrols open up an entirely new world of information and training. Conducting a traffic stop in a car is something we do almost unconsciously because we have had so much training and experience. All of the lessons, training ideas, vehicle positions, lighting, vehicle approaches, high risk stops, etc., that we have learned over the years – some the hard way – now need to be applied to bike patrols. It’s up to us as Public Safety Cyclists to continue



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to promote the safe use of bikes in our jobs, educate our administrations, establish appropriate policies, train new cyclists for the real world scenarios they will encounter, and use our experience to help those just starting out on bike patrol.

Traffic Stop Guidelines

As an agency, the New York State Police does not have formal traffic stop policies for its bike patrols. Troop “E” is far more proactive in its use of bike patrols than other areas, primarily because of Operation Impact. Troopers on bike patrol are expected to conduct themselves in the same manner as if they were in a car regarding tactically sound vehicle approaches and officer safety issues. I am in the process of writing a traffic stop policy for bike patrols, to be submitted for review by our Field Command in Albany. In the meantime, the Troop “E” Bike patrols are using the following guidelines:

Get the driver’s attention both verbally and by using flashing lights.

Identify yourself and instruct the driver to pull over.

If possible, have the driver pull over into a parking lot or onto a side street.

Never make contact with the vehicle while on your bike.

While on your bike, always stay in the safety zone (behind the rear axle).

Use a passenger side approach unless there is a tactical/safety reason to approach on the driver’s side.

Never stand or place your bike directly in front of or behind the vehicle.

Have the driver turn off the car, remove the keys from the ignition and turn on the flashers.

When you call out your stop to the dispatcher, be sure to identify yourself as a bike patrol.

This is a work in progress, but it is important to have guidelines for the bike officers to work by until a formal policy is established. Input is welcome. If you have adopted traffic stop policies for bike patrol that work well, please send them to neil932@aol.com.

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