

LAPD's Bicycle Rapid Response Team

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Tactical Team. That is probably the last image that comes to mind when considering police on bikes. When most people think of bicycle mounted police officers, they think Kiddie Cop, Community Officer, D.A.R.E. Officer, and other outreach positions. When the bike was integrated into police work, it was for all of the above reasons. The bike allows the police officer to get closer to the community, something all police departments need. The bike has helped police officers get closer to their communities, which has helped make them more effective in crime prevention.

As described elsewhere in this issue in the article by Kathleen Vonk, bikes can be used for more than just community policing. They are great for drug enforcement, traffic enforcement, pedestrian violations, and surveillance. But what about crowd management and crowd control? Several agencies around the country have recently begun employing bikes for this purpose. Almost every police department has responded to a large crowd gathering – a football game, a demonstration, a national sports championship party, or a large group of gang members disrupting a peaceful picnic in a park. The goal in any pre-planned event involving a large gathering of people is to manage the crowd, maintaining order and preventing small problems from growing into large ones. At times, however, the crowd “forces its hand,” and the police department is forced to take a crowd control stance. Most departments across the nation have teams – mobile field force, horse-mounted, metro officers, etc. – trained to handle crowd management and crowd control.

Such events can be a challenge because it is often difficult to get a tactical squad to the source of the would-be problem before it becomes a big problem. Movement is difficult because of the number of people, and oftentimes the streets are blocked. By the time a team is moved to the problem on foot, sometimes from many blocks away, the members are exhausted from carrying the huge amounts of necessary equipment.

Past events, such as the demonstrations in Seattle and Philadelphia and the aftermath of several professional sporting events, have indicated that an agency could have the best-trained tactical squads in the world at its fingertips, but if they could not get to the source of the problem quickly enough, they were useless.

In 2000, Los Angeles was host to a major, politically charged event. No-one wanted to see things get out of control. With the concepts of Mobile Field Force Operations in mind, the idea of a bicycle mobile field force squad was born. After weeks of sitting at a drawing board working on bicycle movements and tactics, contacting vendors for equipment, and getting approval from the department, the new bike squad, known as the Bicycle Rapid Response Team (BRRT) was ready for training.

The first thing that the team needed was a mission. It was decided that the team would assist mobile field force units with crowd management and crowd movement through blocking maneuvers and escort. In addition, it would be trained in and carry the equipment to perform crowd control operations if needed.

All members of BRRT were seasoned bike officers who had been through countless hours of mobile field force type training; many of the team members were also less lethal munitions qualified.

Training included riding in tight echelons, both with and without gas masks and assorted tools; and using bike mounted officers as mobile crowd diversion teams. Team members learned to secure the bikes by rapidly weaving them together using a strong length of steel cable, carried by one of the officers on each team, and posting a protection team in case it should become necessary to leave the bikes behind and confront the crowd in a skirmish line on foot.

The team was first deployed during the 2000 Democratic National Convention. As testament to the recognition of the rapid deployment capability and maneuverability of bikes in crowded areas, the units were positioned where demonstrations were most likely to take place. The team consisted of two eighteen-officer squads working together as a platoon. Each squad was comprised of the following:

- 10 officers on skirmish line
- 2 officers less lethal (bean bag shotgun)
- 2 officers less lethal (37mm)
- 1 supervisor
- 1 communication
- 2 equipment officers (lock-down)

The officers were outfitted with long-sleeved shirts, long pants, motorcycle helmets with riot face shields, and back-mounted personal hydration systems. They also carried other special equipment on their persons, such as portable fire extinguishers and fire retardant solutions.

The police bicycles required few modifications. Heavy-duty downhill type rims replaced the existing daily patrol rims; the tires used were Kevlar belted with a liner and fitted with downhill tubes, to prevent flats caused by tacks or finishing nails.

The BRRT was deployed throughout the Democratic National Convention to head off protesters before they could disrupt traffic and business and engage in violent acts. The team was successful even beyond the expectations of the organizers. Once the supervisors became aware of the wide range of tasks the bike officers could handle quickly and efficiently, they found it unnecessary to call into action many of the tactical teams stationed inside and outside the convention.

Following the convention, the BRRT received the following commendation from the command staff:

The Bicycle Rapid Response Team (BRRT) training, developed by Bicycle Coordination Unit (BCU) personnel, has paid off. More than 70 bicycle officers from throughout the LAPD underwent rigorous mobile field force-type training specifically designed for the bicycle patrol officer. The bicycle officers called their skills into action numerous times during the week of the Democratic National Convention (DNC), proving themselves to be a valuable asset and a key force. With the ability to move quickly from assignment to assignment, the BRRT provided the person-power by pedal-power to protect businesses, community members, and protesters during the demonstrations. The command staff, field officers, and rest of the Department are extremely proud of the professional service these bicycle officers provided during this highly publicized world event.

Since its debut at the Democratic National Convention in 2000, the Bicycle Rapid Response Team has been called into action for many situations requiring crowd management in downtown Los Angeles and continues to be met with success.

Please note that successful crowd management and control is best achieved through a joint operation of many department entities, including metropolitan divisions, mobile field force teams, motorcycle strike teams and mounted units.

Although it may seem that this type of bike deployment is suitable only for large departments in cities that are likely to face potentially troublesome demonstrations, the concept is actually adaptable to a wide range of situations. The principles of bicycle rapid response are applicable to most crowd management situations, from demonstrations and parades to high school football games and college parties, to politically-charged speaking events. The escort, blocking, diversionary, and dispersal techniques utilized by the BRRT may be scaled to fit departments and crowds of all sizes.

The training will be introduced at the national level during the 12th Annual Conference of the International Police Mountain Bike Association (IPMBA), May 4-8, 2002. It will be instructed by original and current members of the Los Angeles Police Department Central Division Bicycle Rapid Response Team.

Officer Don Hudson is a 20-year veteran of the LAPD and has been on bike patrol since 1993. He is the founder and lead instructor for the LAPD Bicycle Rapid Response Team. He currently serves as the Vice President of the International Police Mountain Bike Association (IPMBA.) Comments and questions may be directed to him at ridemtbs@aol.com.

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