

# POLICE MOTORCYCLE ESCORTS

By Jim Polan

There is no debate that law enforcement is a dangerous profession and there is an average of 158 officers's killed every year. If the law enforcement officer then makes a personal decision to use the motorcycle as their primary transportation and become a part of something very special, that decision again has raised the bar of safety. Two of the three studies conducted on various issues regarding police officer's on motorcycles identified that traffic enforcement is the primary job assignment and it's a known fact that traffic enforcement is the unknown risk that harms law enforcement officers (LEO) nationwide. Year after year traffic stops and related traffic duties are listed at the top for those who provided the ultimate sacrifice and assaulted in the line of duty.

Over the past three years a total of 459 officers have died in the line of duty with 78 deaths directly related to police motorcycles and traffic stops. A total of 19 are related to motorcycle accidents, 26 were felonious killed during a traffic stop with another 30 were struck and killed in traffic. Six motorcycle officers died while conducting a vehicle escort during this period and who actually knows how many motorcycle officers are injured while participating in an escort.

A Police Motorcycle Officer (PMO) is used daily for various escorts and motorcades during their tour of duty. The question that remains is proper training being conducted and is accurate direction provided by supervisors who possess the necessary knowledge and experience to handle an escort.

Let's first define an escort and motorcade.

**An Escort** is to accompany vehicle(s) and move those vehicles safely from one location to another. Examples would be funerals, sporting events, over size vehicles and some political VIP's. A true escort is the most dangerous to PMO's and in the past three years three officers have given the ultimate sacrifice while conducting an escort for a funeral.

One danger observed during an escort is the unnecessary speed demonstrated by the participating PMO's. Unless there is a true emergency there is no need to travel at an unsafe unacceptable speed while traveling to another intersection. I'm confident many officers are riding "beyond their capability" or even if they are riding within their skill level the time/distance/reaction is reduced while evaluating any potential threat.

**A motorcade** is the movement of a specific procession package of vehicles and each vehicle has an identified purpose. An examples would be an in the line of duty funeral for a fallen brother or sister or a visit from the President of the United States (POTUS). A motorcade is clearly should be the safest type of movement for the motor officer however we have lost officers during a motorcade over the past three years.

In August of 2007 Officer Germaine Casey from the Rio Rancho PD New Mexico suffered fatal injuries while providing assistance for the movement of Former President George Bush Jr.

Just because your agency has a motorcycle unit you and/or the command staff should not assume that the unit, supervisors and officers are prepared to plan, organize and then participate in this task.

Every agency should begin with a department policy regarding escorts. Remember a policy is designed to tell the members of the organization what they can and cannot do so an escort policy may state: "Escorts will not be authorized without a written operational plan".

After you have provided your employees and motor officers on the agency policy you must then provide a motor unit Standard Operating Procedure (SOP). Your agency may have a separate escort SOP or make it part of your current motorcycle operation SOP. An SOP is usually assigned to specialty units and tells the officers "how to" perform. For example: "during any escort there will be a minimum of one officer trailing the package who wears a traffic vest for immediate identification and notification to those officers controlling an intersection".

Now once you have agency approval on what type and how escorts will be conducted we cannot assume that the motor officer has the ability, skill and knowledge to participate in this task. Even if your agency has been performing safe escorts for years you still must have accurate documentation on the type of training that was provided to your officers.

Lawsuits have occurred for improper negligent lack of training and once this petition is filed within the court system the next step is to subpoena all of your training records.

A lesson plan is a blueprint for success, a document that provides education, guidance and training objectives to the task and an in-sight on the specific scope or goal of the course. The lesson plan should cover agency policy and procedure and map out a plan on how your agency operates during an escort. The lesson plan may also identify a way of providing training to your officers before they actually participate in any vehicle movement.

For example: your unit may have the new PMO ride in front with the supervisor and visualize the different passing techniques of the motors and how they position and staff each intersection.

The next movement you may place the new PMO with the tail motor so they will have a complete visual understanding of what is occurring up ahead and while observing the motors in action the new PMO will also learn the importance of having a tail motor and the duties and responsibilities.

You must incorporate training in a low light or night time operation. If in-service training only occurs during the day light hours then you have no idea how your PMO's will react in an accident avoidance situation in darkness with white headlights and the vision possibly being effected by the activated emergency equipment. For most agencies PMO's only work day shift for traffic enforcement so they train in the daylight hours for convenience.

What about the special events and escorts that occur in this low light atmosphere?

For agencies who participate and conduct escorts with other motor units we cannot assume that another agency has the skill to participate in an escort and utilize the same type of procedures as your agency. A procedure as simple as: while moving from one location to another all motors will travel in a single file line and will not pass the motor in front of them.

If your agency has the lead in an escort and other jurisdictions are involved you are able to make the assignments and control the event. Therefore if the other agencies either lack the knowledge or skill to participate in an escort you have a few choices:

- 1) Conduct area training so all agencies are using the same standard operating procedures.
- 2) Assign those officers to a fixed post (i.e. large intersections)
- 3) Put those officers to the rear so they can block potential passing traffic and observe the behavior and conduct of the participating PMO's.

Once the movement is complete a written after action should be completed to start developing a file on numerous issues regarding escorts.

This documentation will provide the agency and unit with a running total of escorts, over time or actual cost to the agency, the number of escorts each officer has actually participated in, day vs. night operations and weather are a few important topics that should be tracked with the goal of only making you and your team better.

Accurate planning followed by effective communication and practical training will result in successful operations while moving any package on a highway.

### **Planning:**

A few examples of what items need to be covered:

- 1) Ride the route, ride it again and then have a second route planning for the "what if"
  - A. identify any construction zones
  - B. depending on the type of day identify any traffic congestion areas
  - C. railroad tracks and the scheduled crossings
  - D. waterways which are covered by a draw bridge/times for the up position
  - E. toll booths

F. every jurisdiction has the same concerns yet each one has something different to offer therefore be prepared.

- 2) If the package will travel in different jurisdictions and that local agency is not participating in the event ensure they know about your movement and invite them to any planning meeting(s). That jurisdiction may have another special event (i.e. parade) that may occur at the same time as the planned escort therefore effective communication is vital to success.
- 3) On game day provide your team with appropriate information during the initial briefing and here are a few items that you should include.
  - A. date/time and meeting location
  - B. communication channel
  - C. accurate description of the route
  - D. pre-planned posts and which officer is assigned
  - E. remind your PMO's to get off their motor while controlling an intersection
  - F. remind your PMO's to park their motorcycle in a safe location within the intersection so it will not block or interfere with the passing motors or package

### **Effective Communication:**

Effective communication is truly different than communication so what is prepared and discussed must be delivered in an accurate atmosphere with clear concise communication by someone who presents a command presence.

- 1) A briefing must occur before any movements not only with the PMO's but with any operators of any participating vehicle that are in the package – they must understand your SOP on escorts do not assume they know how PMO's work
- 2) Do not forget the importance of conducting a debrief. A de-brief is a fact finding meeting and is not designed for finger pointing or potential discipline issues it is a tool to improve on individual ability and overall teamwork.

There is more than one type or style of escorts:

- 1) Bump and Go
- 2) Leap Frog
- 3) Motorcade
- 4) Shuffle

Each method has advantages and disadvantages but the most important issue is whatever your team selects you must ensure they understand the objective and have working knowledge on how to accomplish the goal safely. Depending on your geographic location and the jurisdiction that you are responsible for it may dictate which procedure you use.

Here is a brief overview of the three and in this description I have only provided the mere basic operational procedures.

### **Bump and Go:**

This style is designed for an area with congested two lane roadways or narrow streets which will not allow for the participating motors to pass in a safe atmosphere.

As each PMO takes control of an intersection he/she will remain until another PMO approaches from the same direction of travel and then "bumps" (no contact) and relieves the initial PMO who then continues to the next intersection to "bump" and relieve the other.

For example: There are four motors that are being used for traffic in addition to the lead and tail motor. The traffic motors are released and each PMO controls an intersection. As the package approaches the first intersection the lead will "bump" motor one who will then travel to the next location and then "bump" motor two who then continues to the next location and this method continues until the final destination.

One concern of this style is a PMO riding over their capability and knowing that effective braking is important as they approach the intersection they must have full control to avoid any potential concerns during the relief.

### **Leap Frog:**

A lead motor is identified to set the speed and provide direction to the team. A tail motor is also identified to "close" the package and performs a valuable role to the other team members. The tail motor wears a traffic vest and as he/she approaches the intersection which is under control by another PMO the tail uses the air horn to advise the motor that it's time to mount and clear. The horn is used by the tail so there is no confusion with the traffic control motors that are using the sirens to notify motorists.

Prior to departure all motors are released in the direction of movement to control an intersection. As the package approaches they continue to hold traffic until the tail motor arrives at which time they mount their motor and clear the intersection. This motor then travels toward the package only passing on the left and will not pass any other traveling motors.

The PMO's will stay in a single file line and then as an area of concern arrives the first motor will break off to handle.

The motors that are leaping past the package will continue with this procedure until the final destination.

One area of concern are the motors traveling too fast for conditions and entering an intersection at an unsafe speed however they can be corrected with experience and solid honest de-briefs.

### **Motorcade:**

This truly should be the safest of all movements and is usually only used for a in the line of duty death or a visit from a high dignitary (i.e. President)

Once the package is secured with front and rear security (motors and/or Secret Service and local SWAT depending on the event) all motors are given a fixed post along with patrol officers and community service aides.

Depending on the movement (funeral or DPU) traffic maybe stopped in all directions and at some points vehicles completely cleared from the roadway including bridges. Due to the commitment of personnel the completion of this movement required very little if any passing or changing locations for the motors. But again this is not the rule it depends on the geographic area and type of movement.

It's truly unfortunate that we have had PMO's killed in the line of duty while involved in a motorcade we all have to remember that there is no one so important in the package that requires you to ride beyond your capabilities at an unacceptable rate of speed.

More than once I have had the Secret Service attempt to regulate the speed of the movement which increases the risk and safety of the PMO's. Supervisors you must stand strong with the USSS and explain to them why do not let your officers be exposed to unnecessary risk!

### **Shuffle:**

If the Leap Frog procedure is the most popular, than the Shuffle procedure is probably used the least by motor units. The main reason is the potential for confusion, lack of knowledge and actual participation in the shuffle which can create a hazardous event. However for the agencies that do use the shuffle on a regular basis perform it well with the goal of providing equal work with little verbal communication.

The traffic motors will begin formation in columns of two. Let's visual having six motors in columns of two with motor one the front left, motor two front right and then odds behind motor one and evens behind motor two.

As the traffic motors approach an area that requires attention motor one moves to handle the concern. Motor two now moves to the left position, motor three moves to motor two position, motor four moves to the left and each movement continues.

Once the package passes motor one, he/she will become the tail motor, until the package passes motor two, he/she will become the tail motor. Motor one will safely pass the package and return to the escort formation.

This "shuffle" will continue each time a PMO departs to handle a specific area of concern or pre-identified location.

The information that has been provided is only one way of conducting safe escorts and by no means designed as the "best" way. But I will say all agencies must have a policy, procedure and lesson plan with well documented planning. First this will provide your PMO's with guidance, direction and education and second it will be available for that one day.

Ride well and be safe.

BIO:

Jim Polan is a 28 year veteran of Law Enforcement a retired Captain with the City of Fort Lauderdale Police Department and currently a Lieutenant with the Seminole Police Department in Hollywood, Florida.

