

SAFE STOPS FOR THE POLICE MOTORCYCLE OFFICER

Back in the day lawmen used their mode of transportation for cover during a gun fight they used their horse. Today those lawmen are still instructed on how to use their transportation for cover with the police vehicle but how often are motorcycle officers provided training on using their mode of transportation the motorcycle for cover.

The only thing predictable about law enforcement is the unpredictability. Society and the media continue to use the term “routine” traffic stop and at times even law enforcement officers (LEO) use the “R” word. For society and the media they truly don’t know and understand the difference on how the job is performed however for the LEO it becomes something much worse, complacency. Every stop is an unknown situation and should never be taken as regular task and with that a survival mindset must be maintained at all times.

For a motorcycle officer it’s truly even more important to maintain that survival mindset when all day your task is traffic stops.

In March of this Year City of Oakland, CA Police Department Motorcycle Officers John Hege and Mark Dunakin were both were fatally shot during an unknown risk vehicle stop.

Law enforcement and society must continue to understand and learn from each tragedy that occurs during a traffic stop.

Motorcycle instructors should be preparing their officers for more than “Skills or Rodeo Competition”. Riding advanced cone patterns and slow riding are important to increase your individual skills and a talented rider is appreciated. However, far too often officers are not exposed to the training that will prepare them for survival for example accident avoidance exercises and traffic stop procedures.

All Law Enforcement Officers receive training in unknown and high-risk vehicle stops during their basic recruit training. However, very few agencies provide any type of basic vehicle stop training for the Police Motor Officers (PMO) and even less provide in-service traffic stop training. According to two studies on police motorcycle operation the primary job responsibility for the PMO is traffic enforcement, a very dangerous job. So the question remains why are the majority of police agencies not providing this continuous on-going training to the PMO?

In the last ten years 1,655 officers died in the line of duty, one officer every 53 hours. Thirteen percent of those officers were involved in some type of traffic vehicle stop. But, far too often the public, the media and some police administrators call these stops “Routine”.

In 1992 the FBI Behavioral Science Unit analyzed 51 Law Enforcement Homicides where the officer was the victim. One of the published facts revealed *“It is apparent that several officers in this study did not follow the established and acceptable police procedures when making a traffic stop and this failure was found to be an important contributing factor in their deaths”*.

In 1997 the FBI selected 40 cases of serious assaults against Law Enforcement and identified that *“routine, repetitive tasks emerged as a continuing threat to officer safety”*. *Traffic stops are an example of tasks that should be second nature to officers but posed problems to the victims in the cases studied”*.

Traffic enforcement is a tremendous tool in law enforcement to target problems within the community and what better resource than a police motorcycle officer (PMO). Traffic Enforcement can be used to slow the community down in a school zone, lower crash rates at a specific location or used as saturation patrol with zero tolerance to learn about the individuals or offenders in the area. Some of America’s worst criminals have been apprehended by committing traffic violations.

On May 14, 1983 officers of the California Highway patrol stopped a vehicle for weaving in traffic. CHP soon learned that Randy Kraft was known as the “Southern California Strangler” a prolific murderer.

Ted Bundy one of the most infamous serial killers in American history who murdered more than two dozen women was stopped many times for traffic violations. Finally in Florida he was apprehended.

Timothy McVeigh the gulf war veteran responsible for the Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995 killing 168 people was stopped while driving without a tag.

Now in 2009 we continue to observe the same mistakes that are being made by law enforcement officers while performing this daily unknown job task.

The following information is not designed to tell you how to conduct a vehicle stop, but to remind the PMO just how dangerous the job of traffic enforcement truly brings to the profession of law enforcement.

The various tactics that are going to be discussed are just another way; they are not the only or best way and may vary depending on your working conditions. This information only provides objectives while stopping a violator in a passenger style motor vehicle, due to the size of this article all vehicles/passengers (motorcycle, semi-trailer, multiple passengers) could not be covered.

MOTORCYCLE POSITION FOR A SAFE STOP

Let's begin with the positioning of the motorcycle on an unknown risk vehicle stop. I recommend a minimum of 21 feet from the violator vehicle, a well-established distance for reaction time. This 21 foot rule was just not recently decided upon but taken from the Tueller Rule which is taught in most academies, military and marital arts environment. Basically the 21 foot rule states that an average individual can cover 21 feet in 1.2 to 1.6 seconds and if you're not prepared you may be placed in an unsafe environment. (PHOTO)

With the proper distance applied the motorcycle would point toward the curb, so when the PMO dismounts, the motorcycle will be between the officer and the violator with immediate use of cover from rounds. The motorcycle can also be used as a barrier if the violator exits the vehicle and comes to you in a non-compliance manner, but not a deadly force situation. If for some reason you are unable to angle toward the curb then dismount from the low-side still providing the well needed barrier between the violator and you. (PHOTO)

Police Motor Officer's (PMO) are instructed to dismount from the high side of the motorcycle for the following reasons:

- 1) Stay out of oncoming traffic
- 2) Keep vision on the violator vehicle
- 3) If the side stand does not lock in position the PMO would be stepping away from the side stand and using their non-gun hand to push the cycle away.
- 4) Immediate use of cover.

Yes, the motorcycle is an excellent source of cover. Using a Police Kawasaki KZ 1000 I fired over 70 different rounds at the motorcycle. The rounds varied from a 380 ball to a 223 armor piercing round and nothing penetrated the motorcycle. All rounds are documented and video taped to remove any doubt.

It's important to understand that using the motorcycle for cover would be one of your last resorts, your only choice on a traffic stop or another situation (immediate threat) but the motor officer must understand the tools that are available and how to effectively use the tool. If the officer has the ability to safely move to a concrete wall or use the engine block of a motor vehicle in place of the motorcycle then take it!

APPROACH

There is no perfect way to approach a violator or just one way to perform that will work every time so practice both and be prepared to adapt. It would be difficult to cover every situation in this article or environmental concerns for the various areas of the country. Therefore use this information as a reminder of the dangers of a traffic stop and if your questions are not answered practice those concerns and work out a plan before the problem arises.

Why do Law Enforcement Officers approach on the driver's side?

- 1) That's the way we have always done it
- 2) Convenience to the driver/officer
- 3) Television performs traffic stops to the driver side.

The driver's side approach is an option, but should not be the only way. In survival tactics there should be more than one way of being safe.

With the driver's side approach the primary threat is truly on-coming traffic. Nearly one thousand officers have been run down by reckless, drunk or rubber neck operators of motor vehicles traveling by the traffic stop. This is the first reason why you shouldn't approach to the driver's side. (PHOTO)

NTSA produced a video titled "Your Vest Won't Stop This Bullet" find it, watch it and share the information with others.

During your initial approach remember to bring items that you will need to complete the job task. Daylight stops bring your citation book. By having the book in your possession you don't have to return to the motorcycle to complete the citation. Officers should stay away from their motorcycle while writing the citation or checking on driver's license/warrant status. Once again concerned about on-coming traffic striking the police motorcycle and if the PMO is at the motorcycle the violator has the ability to watch everything that you perform due to the mirrors in their vehicle. They watch you! Technology in police work has increased to the officer's benefit over the years; however, using computers, MDT or ticket writers at the motorcycle during a traffic stop should be considered a "DEADLY DISTRACTION". (PHOTO)

If you are sitting on or near your motorcycle working on the computer/ticket writer, who is watching the violator, a back up/cover officer I would hope. Even if you have a cover officer at the vehicle you still have to be concerned about on-coming traffic striking you and the motorcycle.

If possible move the violator out of the roadway to avoid the number one threat "on-coming traffic" and then position the motorcycle to your advantage off to the side, away from the vehicle mirrors (vision) leaving you behind cover with the motorcycle. (PHOTO)

The citation book may also be used as a diversionary device if a threat occurs during your contact. If a violator would display a weapon the citation book can be used to distract his attention while you draw and move.

On Nighttime stops you obviously would bring your flashlight, but a flashlight and a citation book may create a problem. Have you or your agency practiced motorcycle operation at night? Traffic Stop training at night? If not the question is why?

DRIVERS SIDE APPROACH:

This approach is the most common only because that's the way it's always been done; on television the police approach on the driver side and in real life. The driver knows what the LEO is going to do before it's done they have been trained and with repetition the violators are prepared.

The first problem is that the officer is walking in traffic which is a tremendous safety concern for PMO's. However: if you must approach on the driver's side do as much as possible for overall safety.

Once the violator vehicle stops be prepared to fight! That means your stop has already been radioed into dispatch. You have dismounted the motorcycle obtained possession of your citation book and/or flashlight, removed your helmet if that is your procedure and maintained a continued visual observation of the occupants.

While walking up check the license tag for any unusual observations, not attached properly very dirty on a clean car or very clean on a dirty car which may lead to criminal act.

Check the trunk lock for any tampering, ensure that the lid is shut leaving your prints on the vehicle for any crime scene processing if necessary. And of course it sounds basic police 101 but don't carry anything in your gun hand, yet almost everyday if you watch PMO's in the performance of their duty they commit this error. Another concern with motorcycle officers is that they wear gloves while riding the motorcycle but the true question remains do you also wear those same gloves while training with your firearm? If you do great if not you need to start preparing for that one day.

Remember while walking up on the drivers side you have no cover or concealment no where to run or no where to hide. If a threat appears your only option is to move backwards while drawing your firearm. I have conducted hundreds of scenarios using Simunition FX rounds and those who walk up on the driver's side suffer gun shot wounds, they don't die but they do suffer wounds. You must continue to fight and never give up do not stop a scenarios because you have been shot!

Watch the driver's side mirror, as the operator watches your approach you can also watch them. Visually clear the back seat of any potential threats. Verbally tell the operator to roll down the window if not already down and with professionalism state "could you please place your hands on the steering wheel" you will be surprised how many people comply without hesitation and those who don't may have a reason why. While their hands are on the wheel this provides an opportunity to scan the interior of the vehicle looking for any hazards or threats.

Again learning with training and experience many PMO's during reality based training focus so hard on the operator they miss the obvious. For example ammunition lying on the front seat or an empty holster lying on the back floor which should elevate your risk assessment.

Watch the hands. Society is right handed dominate and the majority of drivers keep their vehicle papers in the glove box or center console. Once they reach for those papers you lose vision of the hand and you are unable to identify what is inside of the box. What if the driver goes to the right rear pocket for a wallet, again you lose vision of the hand or what if the driver goes to purse sitting in the passenger seat, again you lose vision of the hands. (PHOTO)

After you obtain all necessary documents you're going to issue a verbal warning and proceed back to your motorcycle or continue with your investigation and return to a place of safety to conduct business. The question is where is the safest location? There is no perfect place but find a few that offer different values and practice those.

PASSENGER SIDE APPROACH:

The number one threat to American Law Enforcement during a traffic stop is on-coming traffic. Even though the passenger side approach will not completely eliminate the potential of being struck your chances are decreased tremendously. Much to your advantage, this procedure throws a curve ball to the violator who is expecting you to approach on the driver's side.

Once the vehicle comes to a stop be prepared to fight; have everything ready to exit the vehicle or dismount the motorcycle; flashlight and/or citation book in your non-gun hand. Quick peek at traffic and then move to the passenger side of the violator vehicle. If the motorcycle is positioned properly you do not have to be concerned with approaching traffic or crossing over in front of the headlight during nighttime operations. (Photo)

As the officer approach's the vehicle again check the trunk and scan the rear area of the vehicle. If the vehicle is occupied only by the driver, after the hands are placed on the steering wheel and after your initial evaluation open the passenger side door. This will provide you with a tremendous level of vision. Position yourself just to the backside of the passenger side door using a portion of the vehicle to conceal some of your body. Remember distance can create vision so if necessary move back slightly which will improve your angle of view while communicating with the driver. Try this position I'm confident you will immediately realize the rewards. (PHOTO)
State statutes may vary from State to State therefore ensure you will be in compliance before using this procedure.

Returning to the right hand issue of the operator if the driver goes to the glove box, wallet or purse on the passenger seat you never lose vision of the hand. (PHOTO)

Now it's time to issue the citation.

INVESTIGATIVE/CITATION PROCESS: WHERE DO YOU GO?

- 1) Return to your motorcycle: Probably the most popular position but without question the most dangerous for your safety. First of all let's presume you have to remain in traffic and "what if" another vehicle strikes you. Watch the video "Your Vest Won't Stop This Bullet" and then watch it again.

Ok so you actually are out of traffic and that threat is removed. But the violator will have continuous vision on every move that you make by simply watching you in the 1-3 mirrors that the vehicle provides. And if you allow any opportunity for a suspect to strike, your reaction will not beat the violator's action so don't provide the opportunity. Be aware and be prepared!

Again during my experience in conducting dynamic realistic scenarios I watch for the opportunity and then attack the officer who is sitting/standing by the police motorcycle using the computer or ticket writer and then it's too late.

These "deadly distractions" have a positive purpose in LE however not in tactical situation. Even if you have a partner or back-up with you who remains with the violator and you return to the vehicle to work on this "deadly distraction" what about the number one threat to law enforcement on-coming traffic. Even your partner can't help you so the best decision is not to place yourself in this position. Stay away from your vehicle!

Just imagine for a moment being the violator and you're stopped during the night and you have made the decision to attack the PMO.

With little or no vision you exit and travel to the motorcycle because you know the PMO is sitting/standing at the motorcycle because that is what motor officers do. But the PMO has prepared with a survival mindset and is posted away from the motorcycle eliminating the initial attack.

- 2) Driver only or multiple passengers: eight to ten feet off the rear quarter panel of the passenger side of the vehicle. This keeps you away from traffic and removed from the mirrors which create vision for the driver, away from multiple passengers and allows you to seek cover or concealment if necessary. (PHOTO)

There are pros and cons on removing passengers from the vehicle. If everyone stays inside you're dealing with one threat, if you decide to remove anyone you now have divided your threats and may create too much of a challenge for you if your working alone.

However if you do remove the driver and the passengers remain inside place the driver between you and the vehicle and ensure you maintain a visual of the occupants while the drivers back remains to the vehicle.

Once your back-up/cover officer arrives they now assume the cover position of the passenger(s).

- 3) Driver only: after contact and retrieval of required information move over to the passenger side of the vehicle if you started on the driver's side. While you are there open the passenger side door (driver occupied only) this will create a tremendous level of vision and you will have complete control with the violator and without question satisfy the three C's. Before you complain or disregard this procedure try it, it's not perfect but it works very well and helps you create a safer environment. (PHOTO)

Now when the driver reaches for the glove box or center console you can observe the hands the entire time and once that glove box is opened you have a clear unobstructed view to anything that is inside. If the driver reaches for the wallet or into a purse again you have complete vision of the hands. If you are able to control the hands it makes no difference what type of weapon is in the vehicle.

Depending on what state you reside in and whether a firearm is legal or illegal in the glove box and if the driver fails to tell you about the firearm you must treat the driver as hostile until proven different. Go home every night!

While conducting realistic scenarios most officers when they locate a firearm in the glove box have the driver exit and during the exit the officer recovers the firearm. During the exit the officer will lose vision of violator's hands, partial body and just placed the violator vehicle between the two which could lead to a deadly mistake.

One suggestion: point your firearm directly at the subject while giving a command of "put your hands on the steering wheel and look at me" (yes have the subject look directly at your firearm) after the subject complies request back-up and maintain your position until assistance arrives. Then go into contact and cover and safely place the subject into custody and then recover the firearm. Remember the only things that can truly harm you are the hands of the subject, if you are able to control the hands then you have limited their ability to move or obtain a weapon.

During motorcycle tactical training it is stressed that you must dismount as soon as possible and seek cover below the motorcycle. The motor officer must then shoot around and even underneath the machine not over top. During hundreds of force on force scenarios the goal is to engage before the bad guy knows where you are located and never engage from over the top. The bad guy will be looking for you to pop up above/across the motorcycle but you engage from underneath never exposing your body. (Photo)

If time allows remove the motorcycle helmet which provides "zero" ballistic protection but it will "increase" the sight picture for the bad guy.

Numerous motorcycle officers wear gloves on a daily basis for various reasons but the question remains: When you are involved in firearms or tactical training are you wearing those same gloves? If you are great if not then I ask why? (Photo)

This article was not designed to instruct PMO's on how to conduct a traffic stop; in any tactical situation there is more than one way to perform in any situation. You must practice the task so that the procedure will become permanent. The goal of this article is to remind all PMO's how dangerous traffic stops are to Law Enforcement.

Law Enforcement Officers must remember that training must be continuous and on going to refresh our knowledge and make a strong attempt to eliminate complacency.

If you are unable to demonstrate these skills in a practical application, utilize Mental Visualization. Mental training can be used to review almost any training technique. First visualize the type of training objective and then brainstorm on various options. Once you have accomplished the options then visualize actually performing these techniques.

For example: Visualize stopping a vehicle for traffic violation and the violator exits with a weapon. What are your options? How will you react? Practice your reaction.

Mastering the basics is the most important training task that officers can focus upon unfortunately law enforcement officers will never master the basics. Therefore keep practicing!

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