

THE BILL BLACKWOOD  
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The Creation of a Police Motorcycle Unit  
Within the Huntsville Police Department

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by  
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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to recommend the creation of a motorcycle unit within the Huntsville Police Department. Traffic has grown to such a magnitude on the thoroughfares of Huntsville that patrol cars have become ineffective in assuring an orderly flow of traffic. The patrol car is ineffective due its size and lack of mobility in the ever increasing congestion of traffic. The patrol division is ineffective due to the ever increasing number of calls for service with attempts at traffic enforcement between those calls.

From the development of intensive, specialized police motorcycle training, which has drastically reduced police motorcycle accidents as well as reducing injury-related accidents, hundreds of departments are creating, or reviving, motorcycle units within their jurisdictions. This massive resurgence of motorcycle units is due primarily to the ever increasing traffic congestion throughout the country and the continued improvement in training.

Books, journals and periodicals were researched to review documented programs and what made them successful. Several agencies throughout the state which utilize motorcycle units were consulted.

The continued increase in traffic and motor vehicle accidents in Huntsville must be addressed as soon as possible. As other agencies throughout the country have discovered, a motorcycle unit is the most effective and efficient solution to the dilemma.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past couple of years, Huntsville has experienced a drastic increase in the number of vehicles utilizing the major thoroughfares through the city. This increase has resulted in a continued increase in traffic accidents within the city. This increase is expected to continue. In addition, intended road construction projects and traffic pattern changes over the next several years will add confusion and frustration to the existing congestion.

Presently, patrol officers operating patrol cars have the responsibility of enforcing the traffic laws on these congested roadways when not answering patrol calls. Calls for service continually rise yearly as well. Not only does this inadequately address the issue, but during large portions of the day and early evening shifts, the traffic is so heavy that patrol cars have become ineffective for traffic enforcement. Because of the immobility of the patrol cars to safely turn or navigate in heavy traffic, most patrol officers opt not to attempt many traffic stops due to the danger and liability.

The creation of a motorcycle unit dedicated to addressing the present and projected traffic issues is an effective and efficient approach to the problem. During the development of this project, books, journals, and periodicals will be reviewed to evaluate the positive and negative aspects of operating a motorcycle unit. Departments which presently utilize motorcycles

will be interviewed to determine when and why the unit was established, the size of the original unit, the present size of the unit, the training mandated for the unit and overall to alleviate any shortcomings that they may have experienced during their development.

The final proposal attempts to provide adequate documentation to show that the creation of a motorcycle unit is more effective and efficient than the utilization of patrol cars in highly congested traffic areas. This proposal will be submitted to the Chief of Police and Command Staff of the Huntsville Police Department to review and plan for the creation of the stated unit. It will also be available to other small cities experiencing a severe growth in vehicular traffic.

#### HISTORICAL, LEGAL, AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Law enforcement agencies in the United States have utilized motorcycles for nearly a century now. Without a doubt, these motor officers serve in one of the most dangerous assignments in policing. Every traffic stop is an invitation to face the unknown. Every intersection presents a life-threatening hazard. It is blistering hot in the summer and sub-zero in the winter. If it sounds like a job nobody would want, guess again. In every agency, it is a volunteer assignment. There are waiting lists to join (Morrison 21). In Miami alone during the early 1980s, two hundred (200) of the department's seven hundred (700) uniformed officers were on the waiting list for the motorcycle unit.

In the early 1950s, the Traffic Institute, Northwestern University, and the Traffic Division of the International Association of Chiefs of Police conducted a survey on the use of solo motorcycles by municipal police agencies. Eighty-seven percent of the departments surveyed stated that they favored the solo motorcycle over the automobile for traffic enforcement. The following reasons were cited:

1. Maneuverability.
2. Economy of operation and maintenance.
3. Psychological effect on the motorist.
4. Quick acceleration.
5. Short turning radius.
6. Can travel through less space in congested areas.

However, during this time frame, a vast number of agencies discontinued their motorcycle units due to accidents and injuries. A later study revealed that a majority of these agencies provided little training at the onset of the motor officer's assignment. In most cases, initial training was merely riding with an experienced officer for a predetermined time, then released on one's own.

The agencies which retained their motor units began realizing the need for formal specialized motorcycle training in the late 1960's and early 1970's. The training was developed initially for safety reasons, however, it was additionally determined to be an effective tool to reduce the exposure to

liability.

#### REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND PRACTICE

Every year, thousands of police chiefs throughout the country ask themselves the question, "Are motorcycles a waste of money?" It would appear that the majority of the chiefs across the country look upon the motorcycle as an indispensable part of their departmental equipment. When police administrators are asked for an explanation of the increased sale of motorcycles to police departments they cite these reasons:

1. Nothing can equal the efficiency and maneuverability of a motorcycle in congested traffic. In downtown or urban areas where unexpected traffic jams clog controlled intersections, a patrol car may not be able to get through, where a motorcycle navigates with ease.

2. Because the motorcycle officer is openly visible, he seems more accessible to the public, and for this reason he has found to have a much greater public relations value than officers in patrol cars.

3. The motorcycle has a greater psychological effect in suppressing speed in urban areas.

4. The motorcycle also has superior psychological effect when used on occasional patrol assignments in residential neighborhoods.

5. The motorcycle is also exceptionally valuable in handling unusual crowd situations such as disasters, traffic jams,

and crowd control.

Nevertheless, even if all of these arguments are conceded, the other chiefs will often say, "These advantages are all wiped out by the simple fact that too many officers are maimed or killed while riding a motorcycle." A number of years ago this was the primary reason why the motorcycle was almost eliminated from police use. Then why have motorcycles reemerged with such magnitude? The professionals say it was because they were able to demonstrate that the vast majority of motorcycle injuries and accidents were avoidable. It was proven that the main cause of accidents had been lack of training. They pointed out that accidental injuries from firearms decreased sharply when officers were given adequate training. They insist that the same thing has been demonstrated with motorcycle training (Chapman 253).

The Hurt Study (1981), Traffic Safety Center of the University of Southern California, analyzed 3600 motorcycle accidents in the Los Angeles area. Some of the key findings of this study are as follows:

- (1) 5% of the riders involved in motorcycle accidents were trained through a certified motorcycle training course.
- (2) 92% of the riders involved in accidents were self taught.
- (3) The study showed of 886 riders where collision avoidance was taken, 24% of evasive actions were properly executed, 76% were not.
- (4) Most accidents are caused by human factors, not environmental or vehicular.

The study indicated that the lack of training is a significant factor in accident involvement. It is clear that



motorcycle riders greatly benefit from specialized training, and develop skills, strategies, and attitudes to limit accidents and reduce injury severity. An example of the improvement in the area of reduced accidents and injuries is the accident record of the Dallas Police Motorcycle Section. The unit has had only one motorcycle officer killed in an on-duty motorcycle accident since formal training programs began in the 1960's. When compared to regular police fleet accidents, the motorcycle unit's record is superior (Caperton p9). The chief instructor for the Los Angeles Police Motorcycle Unit confirmed that their accident rate, compared to miles driven, was better than that of their squad cars due to their intensive specialized training.

Departments nationwide are establishing or reviving police motorcycle units. For example, more than 100 departments initiated motorcycle units in 1990. Interviews were conducted with three police agencies falling within this category; the Bedford Police Department, Sugarland Police Department, and League City Police Department. According to the supervisors of these units, all were created due to the drastic increase in traffic congestion and traffic accidents within their respective jurisdictions. The same conditions that now exist in Huntsville.

Captain Roger Gibson with the Bedford Police Department stated that their unit was created in 1991, beginning with two motorcycles. He advised that the unit, which has since been expanded to four motorcycles, has been a great success. He also

advised that their accident rate is very low due to their intensive and constant training. Sergeant Jimmie Surratt of the Sugarland Police Department stated that their unit was established in 1996 with two motorcycles. They are in the process of expanding the unit to four motorcycles. He also stated that accidents are almost nil due to their specialized initial training and regularly scheduled maintenance training. Lieutenant Janet Hornbeck with the League City Police Department advised that the department created their motorcycle unit in 1990 with two motorcycles. They have since expanded the unit to four motorcycles. She advised that they too mandate extensive training for their motorcycle officers, which have kept accidents to a very low rate. In addition, Lieutenant Greg Layman of the Addison Police Department and Chief Roger Macon of the Haltom City Police Department were interviewed. Both agencies have utilized motorcycle units for over fifteen years, and have expanded their units since inception. Both also cited very low accident rates due to their extensive training procedures, advising that it has been over three years since an accident has occurred.

It is evident that early police motorcycle units were deadly due to lack of training. However, research proves that the extensive training programs developed over the past twenty years have reduced accidents and injuries to less than that of police cars. Agencies throughout the country have created or revived,

then expanded, motorcycle units due to ever increasing traffic problems which now plague every jurisdiction.

#### DISCUSSION OF RELEVANT ISSUES

Police motorcycles, also call *solos* or *motors*, are as unique and specialized as bicycle patrols. They are a public relations tool that can be used to break down barriers with citizens. Motorcycles have long been a valuable asset in law enforcement. They give officers a far greater range of mobility than a patrol car, with few disadvantages (Yates p50).

The primary reason behind the attempt to create a motorcycle unit is naturally the drastic and continued growth of vehicular traffic in the majority of jurisdictions throughout the country. Along with this increased growth in traffic brings an increase in vehicular accidents. In 1990, Huntsville investigated 617 accidents. By 1995, the accident rate had reached 1004; a 63% increase over 1990's rate. The number of vehicles travelling Huntsville's roadways continue to increase. If the traffic flow cannot be conformed into travelling in an orderly manner the number of accidents, specifically injury-related accidents, will naturally increase (Huntsville has experienced five fatality accidents within the first six months of 1998 - 2 more than any other year of this decade). This congestion has increased to the rate that a patrol car cannot effectively monitor and enforce the flow on several of Huntsville's major thoroughfares.

A department considering the establishment of a motorcycle

unit must take into account three important considerations, says Deputy John Echoff, a motorcycle instructor for the Harris County, Texas Sheriff's Department: the agency's geographic area, since weather can be an issue; the selection process for the solo officer, who must possess inherent qualities of communication and common sense; and the unit's potential as a public relations tool. If you put a motorcycle in a residential neighborhood, even on an occasional patrol, you can watch the relationship develop. If you have an officer who represents the department well and maintains a professional image, the public relations benefit will be immeasurable (Pilant 35).

The two primary reasons police administrators have expressed against the use of motorcycles are the danger involved and weather limitations. As was mentioned previously, motorcycle officers serve in one of the most dangerous assignments in policing. However, it has been proven over the past decade that the development and growth of formal specialized police motorcycle training in agencies which utilize such units have experienced an accident and injury rate less than that of their patrol cars. The research shows that formal police motorcycle training programs have directly impacted the reduction of accidents and injuries by improving the officer's riding skills and abilities far above those of the civilian riding public (Caperton 9). Beyond the exceptional training now available, departments must be ever careful in their selection of motor

officers. Miami Police Department estimated that about 30% of their motor accidents involved officers in their early twenties. The older officers were found to have a better driving record due to their experience and better driving habits (Serdahely 60).

On the issue of weather, Huntsville's climate is conducive to supporting a motorcycle unit. The winters are relatively mild and the yearly rainfall is such that it would not normally cause lengthy interruptions in the unit's operations. There are agencies, such as the Seattle, Pittsburgh, and Reno Police Departments which operate their motor units year round. Huntsville could operate under this system on a limited basis.

The major constraint existing at present is manpower within the agency. To create a motorcycle unit within the Huntsville Police Department at this time would require additional personnel; the number dependant on the intended size of the unit. In addition, since no unit exists at this time, the acquisition of equipment must also be addressed. It should be noted, however, that a fully equipped police motorcycle costs half that of a fully equipped patrol car, and in some instances less than half. The city could realize a greater savings by allowing the officer to purchase their own motorcycle, then render an allowance to the officer for the use of the motorcycle. In this manner, the officer would be responsible for note payments, maintenance, and insurance.

Police package motorcycles are currently available through

Harley-Davidson, Kawasaki, Honda, and BMW. The increasing number of companies offering police package motorcycles create not only competitive prices, but create better motorcycles in terms of performance, reliability, maintenance, and safety.

#### CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this project is to recommend the creation of a motorcycle unit within the Huntsville Police Department. For the past several years, the level of traffic has steadily increased on the thoroughfares of Huntsville, as has the accident rate. Additionally, Huntsville is experiencing an increase in injury-related accidents. To compound the situation, there have been several traffic control changes within the past year to intersections which handle heavy degrees of traffic, and intended road projects are being scheduled which will place great demands on the police department. The level of traffic as it exists today is beyond the effectiveness of the patrol division in patrol cars and is projected to worsen.

To date, there has been no attempt to plan on how the department is to address this problem. Other cities have realized the ineffectiveness of patrol cars in the enforcement of traffic in congested situations, and created motorcycle units. Once realizing the effectiveness, efficiency and success of these units, they have expanded them.

The most viable solution to addressing the increasing accident rate from the ever increasing traffic congestion is the

creation of a carefully selected, intensely trained motorcycle unit. A motorcycle unit obviously will not be able to reduce the amount of traffic travelling on Huntsville's roadways. The unit will, however, through the motorcycles' superior acceleration, mobility and maneuverability, enforce aggressive traffic violations which cause traffic accidents, resulting in damage, injuries, and life. The motorcycle unit, in addition, must be utilized as a public relations tool and cast a positive reflection on the department through its training and professionalism.

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