

# When You 'Drop Your Bike'

## Serious Injury Is Common For Police On Cycles, And Survival Is Mostly Luck

By Lucius Lomax  
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In the lobby of Atlanta police headquarters on Decatur Street, a plaque bears the names of 34 officers who have died in the line of duty since November 1946.

Of the 34 officers, 12 died while on motorcycle patrol.

The first officer named, J. Harry McWilliams, died on Nov. 11, 1946, in a motorcycle accident.

McWilliams was patrolling Ponce de Leon Avenue on his Indian police bike when a car pulled out of a side street to make a left turn. McWilliams ran into the car broadside and was killed.

Fred Nunnally, termed by the present commander of the traffic division "one of the best riders we ever had," died the same way on Feb. 11, 1956. A motorist failed to yield the right-of-way while making a left turn, cutting across the path of Nunnally's oncoming motorcycle.

Of the 12 who died in on-duty motorcycle accidents, seven were killed when motorists made left turns.

The last Atlanta motorcycle policeman to die in the line of duty was James Millard Cannon. He was killed on Memorial Drive on the afternoon of June 17, 1973, when a motorist turned left from a side street in front of him.

In the last month, four officers have "dropped" their bikes. On May 18, an accident occurred when an officer tipped over while taking a turn in Chastain Park in pursuit of a violator. A leaking fire hydrant had flooded the street, and the officer lost his balance.

"He probably would have died without that new helmet," said Capt. C.V. Forrester, commander of the Traffic Division.

As it was, Officer R.H. Gresham suffered four broken ribs, a broken collarbone, and abrasions on his face and body.

"The knuckles on one hand were ground down to the rest of the hand," Forrester said.

The new helmet, with which the

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## Bike Squad Does No-Perks, Tough Duty

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One would-be Atlanta motorcycle policeman took his first ride the hard way.

It was back in the days when the motorcycle squad was housed in a shed at the police depot on Key Road, recalls Capt. C.V. Forrester, Traffic Division commander.

"It was his first day, and he wasn't going to let anyone show him," Forrester said. Forrester said the officer mounted his bike, swerved across the shed and then slammed into a steel beam near the door.

"The bike stayed there, but he flew right out the door into the street," said Forrester.

Officially, the squad's responsibility is traffic control and enforcement. Officers also work such special details as directing traffic outside the Omni during a rock concert or around the stadium during a ball game.

The Atlanta motorcycle patrol's day watch consists of 10 officers. Evening watch, which begins with roll call at 3:30 p.m. in the basement of police headquarters, would normally be made up of 30 officers but has been cut to 22 because of the Atlanta police

manpower shortage. There are six supervisors.

Training for the Atlanta motorcycle squad has for the most part been based on the buddy system. During the 1950s, a prospective officer had to be accepted by a vote from the squad and then was paired off with a veteran officer.

The Los Angeles Police Department has what Forrester calls the "exemplary" motor squad in the country. It consists of 322 officers and 27 supervisors.

Candidates for the LAPD motorcycle squad must in most cases have

been patrol officers for two years. They are tested and interviewed by a board of officers and, if accepted, begin the motorcycle course with two eight-hour-a-day weeks of riding bikes.

One course exercise requires the officer to head into a barrier of street-repair cones—simulating a wall—at 35 mph, do a slide, force the bike into a 180-degree turn, and continue back the way he came.

LAPD officials estimate that between two-thirds and three-quarters of those who begin the riding course finish it.

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# Squad

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squad was supplied last fall, has a chin strap that won't come loose on the first impact. That's important, Forrester said, because when a man hits the pavement going 30 miles an hour, he bounces.

"Why, this helmet should be good for three or four impacts," Forrester explained. "First thing we used to have to do after an accident was go look for the helmet. . . . Our equipment generally is a lot better."

It is difficult to compare the squad's safety record today with previous years, Forrester said. The squad has better equipment now, with foreign-built bikes that are more maneuverable.

Officers were not required to wear helmets until 1956, following a public outcry over two fatalities, and Forrester said he knows that at least four of the officers who were not wearing helmets died of head injuries.

(State law requires anyone operating a motorcycle to wear a helmet, with a visor if the bike is not equipped with a windshield, and shoes. "The only protection we have more than that," Forrester said, "is a gun.")

Furthermore, motorcycle patrols have been "de-emphasized under recent administrations under the theory that the man on the beat would handle everything," Forrester added. "The squad was three times bigger during the '50s."

Forrester has two men on light duty today because of accidents. He said that on the average, the squad loses 100 man-days a year because of on-duty injuries.

Officers say the atmosphere is low-key at the motor squad right now. Accidents, Forrester and other officers have observed, come in series of three or four every few months. As the logic in the squad room puts it, everyone is safe until late summer, when officers will again start "eating it"—meaning the asphalt.

"Eating it" must involve "serious hurt," officers explained. Dropping the bike while riding over gravel in the parking lot doesn't count. However, if a detective speeding across the police

parking lot in the wrong direction wipes out a bike and injures an officer, as happened a few years ago, that counts.

Oil puddles, bad weather and leaves are as dangerous as cars. The worst possible conditions for motorcyclists, Forrester said, are produced by rainfall after a long dry spell, when the accumulated dirt, pollen, oil and leaves mix with the water to form a road surface that is impossible to negotiate safely.

"You'll bust your rear end first thing," Forrester said.

Forrester doesn't require enforcement—chasing speeders—during the rain, but he does make his officers travel to special details, such as traffic control at the Omni or the stadium.

Forrester said the individual officer always has permission to break off pursuit if it becomes too dangerous.

The idea in the rain, Forrester explained, is to keep the suspect in sight and wait for another unit to block the road.

The best war story, officers said, belongs to Officer J.T. Puckett.

Last Sept. 14, as Puckett told it, he was patrolling Interstate 75 south on his motorcycle when he spotted a Camaro Z-28 speeding ahead of him. The Camaro was doing more than 70, but Puckett gave his bike some throttle and pulled alongside.

Puckett saw three people in the car. He had his blue lights flashing, but his siren wasn't working, so he signalled with his hands for the driver to pull over. Puckett said he saw a look of pure hate flash across the driver's face—and then the driver tried to kill him.

The Camaro's driver swung the wheel sharply to the left, and the car swiped Puckett's bike, knocking it down. But when the safety bar that surrounds the bike's engine hit the pavement, the bike bounced back up and Puckett maintained control of the machine.

The officer was trying to get away when the Camaro swerved into him again. This time, the motorcycle's safety bar became caught on the fender of the Camaro.

Puckett and his machine were dragged down the freeway until the Camaro's driver sideswiped another car,

knocking Puckett and his bike free.

"I slid down that freeway two or three hundred yards," Puckett said. He suffered abrasions on his shins and knees and had the skin stripped from both forearms.

The car turned out to be stolen from Tennessee. The 15-year-old driver was arrested when the chase ended at Central City Park. Before it was over, it had caused nine separate crashes and crushed a second police bike.

"I was scared for a while after that about going to work," Puckett explained. "I was lucky to live."

As another Atlanta officer put it, "It's not whether you drop your bike, but how many times."

Luck seems to play a big part of it. During a four-year period in the mid-1960s, four officers were killed in on-duty accidents. They were all bikers,

## Danger

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Next is a week-long classroom course that includes special instruction on traffic rules. Finally, a rookie is paired off with a veteran officer for a month.

Unlike officers in some other jurisdictions, Atlanta motorcycle officers do not get a danger-pay differential. LAPD motor officers are given \$150-a-month hazard pay in addition to their salary.

Twelve Atlanta motorcycle policemen have been killed in line-of-duty accidents since November 1946, and a 13th officer was killed in an accident on his bike on the way home from a second job.

Since 1946, 12 LAPD officers also have been killed in on-duty accidents.

The Los Angeles squad has no women. Atlanta didn't either, Forrester said, until 1974, when then-Police Chief John Inman noticed the department had no female motorcycle officers and

and two were killed within a block of each other. Both men had the same partner.

Sometimes, a motorcycle patrolman's death is far from an accident. On Aug. 28, 1959, Officer Charles J. Busby was on evening patrol with his partner on Marietta Boulevard when they paused on a street in front of a gas station.

As Forrester told it, "A crazy driver saw them (the two officers) and decided he wanted to kill some police"—so the driver gave the car some gas, came tearing out of the station, and crashed into the two motorcycles. Busby was killed, and his partner lost a leg.

Another officer, Clyde J. Elsberry, was killed on July 9, 1955, when a prisoner escaping from the Atlanta work farm on Key Road crashed into his bike.

offered a place on the squad to any woman in the graduating class of the April police academy.

Seven women accepted and went through a special week-long bike-riding class at the academy.

Of those seven women, none now remains with the motorcycle squad. One of the seven drives a three-wheeler for the city but is not considered part of the motorcycle patrol.

Forrester attributes the high attrition rate of women to the rigors of being a motorcycle officer. "A few of them quit the force, and a few of them got in the family way," he said.

The Atlanta Police Bureau owns 52 bikes—32 Kawasaki 1000cc models and 20 74-cubic-inch Harley-Davidsons. The Harleys are holdovers from past years, and most officers will be glad to see them replaced by the more maneuverable Kawasaki 1000s come the next city motorcycle purchase.