

## **THE NEW BREED OF MOTORCYCLE SQUAD** **THE MIAMI-DADE POLICE DEPARTMENT**

One of the most vulnerable and dangerous positions on the Miami-Dade Police force is the lone rider on the motorcycle squad. At the tip of Florida, Miami-Dade County has more population per square mile than the rest of the state with thousands of commuters pouring into the international commerce center from a network of freeways. With an overflow of traffic onto county roadways, Miami-Dade has one of the worse traffic congestion problems of any major city 24/7. It is the challenging duty of the motorcycle squad to keep traffic flowing smoothly and safely on the more than 1,000 square miles of roadways the county covers. The dedication of the seventeen elite motorcycle officers that serve a population of more than two million people is a tough commitment to surpass.

### **THE MISSION OF THE MOTORCYCLE SQUAD**

With the population of more than 2.5 million people, or 1,157 people per square mile living in Dade County, traffic begins to jam the streets and freeways in the pre-dawn hours late into the evening with commuters extending beyond the county line.

In a department of 3,100 sworn officers, the motorcycle unit is tight, compact and proficient. “The unit fulfills a basic mission in law enforcement in facilitating the flow of traffic,” said MDPD Director Carlos Alvarez. “In Dade County, due to the heavy traffic problems throughout the metropolitan area, the motor unit is paramount to everyone’s safety.”

With an annual budget of \$2,684,755 of the department's \$422,797,000, Lt. Antonio Perez, Commander of the Motorcycle Unit, says that although the Department provides the squad with equipment needs, there are not enough personnel to dedicate to traffic enforcement. The squad is always going from call-to-call.

As a "free roaming" patrol, the motorcycle unit is utilized in the most intensive traffic areas and are on-call to support road units when problems arise. Since there is a "no chase" policy in the MDPD, if a motorist flees an officer, the call is handed over to the helicopter or a regular unit to track the vehicle, but a pursuit is only ordered in a forcible felony if the situation meets specific criteria.

The defensive mechanisms provided the motor squad officer is his own innate vigil, physical agility, a sidearm, body protection armor and a two-way communication system wired inside the helmet to a team of dedicated individuals.

## **DIVERSE DUTIES DEMAND MULTIFACETED TALENTS**

### **Pro-Active Traffic Stops**

The motor unit is comprised of one lieutenant, three sergeants, a total of seventeen riders that attest to a strong professional ethic and pride in performing their duties. A motorist stopped by an officer for a traffic violation is not in a friendly mode but Sgt. Mario Sanchez, who joined the squad in 1998, explains that officers are trained to respond professionally despite negative comments or attitude. Sanchez says that he greets the driver with a smile and asks, "How are you doing today?" He says that that his unit is a "new breed" of motorcycle officer trained in a pro-active communication approach to the situation. Instead of immediately

interrogating or lecturing the motorist about a violation, they explain the nature of their public service duty in keeping the roadways safe for everyone. The officers are aware that they are performing an unwelcome task, but Sanchez says motorists usually know they have violated a traffic law and respond more positively to a firm, but positive attitude from the officer.

Besides being able to pro-actively communicate with a traffic violator, the motorcycle officer has to maneuver an 800 pound Harley-Davidson through tight turns, negotiate curbs, brake quickly, and be able to untwist traffic snarls into a smooth flowing, safe pattern wherever he is called to serve.

In the capacity of traffic safety, the motorcycle squad also has multifaceted duties in collaboration with other units inside and outside of the MDPD.

### **Dignitary Protection Unit**

The motor squad is the official dignitary escort, responsible for their safe travel when visiting Miami-Dade County. One of the most important dignitaries is the President of the United States. When the President arrives at the airport, the motorcycle squad escorts him and his entourage to various destinations throughout the area. A Presidential visit is a complex and integrated process that cannot be compromised for expediency.

Prior to the President's visit, a Sergeant from the MDPD's Special Response Team, designated as the liaison between the Dignitary Protection Unit and the President's Secret Service discuss security arrangements.

The Secret Service advises the MDPD liaison on what protective services are needed, the schedule, duration and destinations during the Presidential visit. The Sergeant then briefs the motor squad, the Florida Highway Patrol, bomb squad, and other participating law enforcement agencies.

Escorting the President is a unique experience, says Sgt. Sanchez, as well as working with the Secret Service who are cooperative and professional. When the motorcycle squad escorted former President Clinton around the County, he made a special point to thank the motor squad for their services as he departed on Air Force One. Sgt. Sanchez says, "We take pride in doing a good job."

In a more difficult circumstance, the motor squad was called to duty during the November 2003, Free Trade of the Americas Association conference in Miami. The meeting posed major concerns, attributed by Director Alvarez to more than 500 self-proclaimed "anarchist" protestors, that unlike the peaceful AFL-CIO, did not intend to abide by lawful regulations agreed upon by local law enforcement agencies and planners months before the event.

Director Alvarez said that the "anarchists" were well trained and came with an agenda to disrupt, cause property damage and inflict injuries in an attempt to close the Port of Miami, the main international commerce center and disrupt the meeting. However, he said that the MDPD and motor units were professional and restrained, despite taunts and aggression from the agitators. Lt. Perez said that they planned closures of streets that were not significant but

were part of a strategy to maintain the protestors in a controlled area. The motor squad was shifted around to throw off the anarchists and prevent their advancement into the community.

The motorcycle unit was also responsible for escorting guest speakers through the maze of cordoned off streets, roadblocks, protestors and motorists to event headquarters at the Intercontinental Hotel in downtown Miami. Lt. Perez said the motor squad was posted at downtown locations to maintain the safety of the marchers, keep an open passage for law enforcement vehicles and to avoid traffic congestion around the conference area.

The law enforcement strategies for the event were orchestrated in collaboration with other agencies under the jurisdiction of the City of Miami Police Department Chief John Timoney. As sworn county deputies, the MDPD worked in adjunct with the commander on the scene who designated where the motor squad was most needed to re-route traffic for public safety.

### **Miami International Airport Security**

The only permanent duty station of the MDPD motor squad is at Miami International airport, the third largest in the nation. Sgt. Gary King is in charge of two officers who facilitate departing and arriving passenger traffic at the terminal. The motors are vital in maneuvering traffic through the narrow multi-laned airport tie-ups and delays that pose a safety hazard for pedestrians and motorists. Additionally, with the advent of the Homeland Security Act, the MDPD works in concert with federal airport security in keeping a close vigilance to avoid the shadow of a terrorist event.

### **DUI Arrests and Other Public Safety**

On duty in the late night and wee hours, Sgt. John Harris, another officer of the motor squad and a Public Service Aide assist the DUI unit in administering tests and responding to calls. The collaborative effort of the units has resulted in the highest DUI arrests in the department. Sgt. Harris's responsibility is to make sure that the chain of custody in DUI testing is followed under strict FDLE regulations.

Another concern unique to Miami-Dade is the large diverse population especially in what Lt. Perez terms as the "driving culture." He explains that many older residents from other countries have never before driven a car until they came to the United States and they are missing certain abilities. Americans take driving capabilities for granted since U.S. citizens are eligible to obtain a driver's license at age 16. These poorly skilled drivers pose a threat to other motorists and pedestrians. Just because they passed the driver's test and obtained a license, does not mean they have the skills or experience to handle the erratic driving maneuvers of motorists who weave in and through traffic at high speeds on major roadways.

Another safety hazard on Miami-Dade streets is the use of motorized "toy" vehicles operated by juveniles. These "toys" impose a danger both to the juvenile and other motorists. Another duty of the motor squad officer is to inform the parent or guardian of their responsibility for the juvenile's violation and issue a warning or citation. The problems confronted by the officers on the motor squad in the daily performance of duties, transports them across miles of county roadway and into the personal lives of citizens to protect the public at large.

## **QUALIFICATIONS AND TRAINING**

Only the most fit, agile and competent can pass the rigorous screening process and eighty-hour obstacle-training course to become one of the seventeen elite motor officers.

There are few options for mistakes when a motorcycle rider hits the road, says Lt. Perez, thus, the selection process to become a motor rider is demanding. Every two months, the motor squad begins an 80-hour training course at Crandon Park beach parking lot taught by instructors on the squad.

The candidate that gravitates towards the motor unit usually has performed a peripheral motorcycle duty in another area of law enforcement and has traffic experience. Although it is not a qualification, candidates for the motor squad need to be physically fit, agile, committed to performing a lone duty in heavy traffic and under dangerous unpredictable foul weather conditions.

The first step in becoming a motorcycle officer is successfully moving through the competitive interview process. Once candidates are selected in preliminary screenings, they have to pass the two-week obstacle course training. Sgt. Mario Sanchez completed an additional 80 hours of training at the Institute of Police Technical Management at Jacksonville Florida to qualify as one of four team Instructors. Instructors are also required to update their training on a continual basis and participate in training other law enforcement agency's motor squads.

The obstacle course training at Crandon Park Beach provides a challenging course with winding roads, sharp turns, puddles and other conditions to test a candidate's motorcycle handling capabilities.

The course includes intensive training in the essential skills that a squad officer contends with on a daily basis such as negotiating curbs, quick braking, tight turns and evasive maneuvers. The riders are not expected to use excessive speeds but learn proficiency in a clean ride. They also are instructed in the MDPD standards of operation and bike maintenance.

If an officer passes the training, he joins a motor unit that collectively has clocked more than 300 years of professional law enforcement and motorcycle experience.

### **THE HARLEY-DAVIDSON MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE**

The fleet cost of a new Harley is \$13,000 each. The squad has seventeen motors and two spares that are available at a north and south location of Peterson's Harley Davidson dealership to handle breakdowns when covering the opposite side of more than 1,000 square miles of Miami-Dade County.

The squads' Harley-Davidsons are augmented with lights, sirens and other special law enforcement equipment. They have a five-gallon capacity gas tank that lasts about 150 miles. To avoid travel back to headquarters for a fill-up, the squad uses a department issued Amoco

credit card. The motors also do not use an ignition key; they start with the flick of a switch once they are unlocked.

The motorcycles are kept for approximately three and a half years depending on the mileage and condition. When the motors are ready for retirement they are sold through the County's General Services Administration auction, or Harley-Davidson offers a set buy back plan based upon condition.

The Harley's are equipped with a mounted moving radar and hand held laser unit, a PA system and police radio. In the near future, the department is planning to add a small computer on the limited dash space, similar in size to a palm pilot. In the meantime, officers call in information through microphones linked to their wired communication system in the helmet.

### **The Hazards**

Exposed to tense, hazardous traffic problems on a daily basis, the lone rider has the psychological support of a dedicated and close-knit team. There is little supervision, but as Lt. Perez indicates, a lot of trust. The squad members express a commitment and dependability within the small ranks at their headquarters where the motorcycles are lined up precisely in the garage adjacent to their offices. They attend daily briefings at roll call and requests from other patrol units for special back up services to troubled areas. They believe they perform a job that saves lives. In the explosive population of Miami-Dade County and the frustration of driving in constant traffic problems, the officers are constantly confronted

with agitated motorists. “Road rage” is a consistent concern that the officers have to mediate and tone down in order to prevent a potentially explosive incident.

How do they survive the stressful hazards of their jobs? They support one another with humor and positive reinforcement. The motorcycle squad offices are lined with family pictures, certificates of achievement and proud smiles reflecting involvement with their children in athletic pursuits and other activities.

They have an awards stand with tall, silver and gold trophies won at various competitive motorcycle events across the state, they visit schools and participate in community events.

The squad has lost only one of its veterans, Officer Ruben Jones, who died on duty when a driver made an illegal u-turn at a football game. Although that was 15 years ago, Lt. Perez brought out his picture to commemorate his presence and contribution to the squad.

Most of the seventeen riders have been on the squad for more than ten years. Notably, when meeting and speaking with the officers, the comment most frequently reiterated was that they plan to fulfill their vital role to serve public safety and the MDPD as long as they are able into the future.