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## Smart Riders



Written by: [Jan Tegler](#) on May 16, 2011

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**Chief Master-at-Arms Aaron Mitchem, assigned to the security department at Fleet Activities Sasebo, participates in a motorcycle safety class at the Akasaki Motorcycle Range. The class was designed to teach motorcycle mechanics and safety to both new and experienced riders. U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Casey H. Kyhl**

The year 2008 was the deadliest on record for U.S. Navy and Marine Corps personnel who ride motorcycles.

"There was a period of time in 2008 when we had more Marines die on motorcycles than they did on the battlefield," says Don Borkoski, one of two Motorcycle Safety Specialists now in place at the Naval Safety Center. "That was only for a month, but it drew a lot of press and highlighted the fact that the services were losing a lot of guys on motorcycles.

Thirty-three personnel were lost in motorcycle accidents during the year. Many more were injured, although accurate statistics for those not involved in fatalities are not easy to come by because so many accidents go unreported.

"People just think, 'I'll limp around and deal with it,'" Borkoski adds. "If an injury happened at work we'd know, but most injuries occur off-base. Sometimes the rider will take leave or they just won't tell their command and we won't know."

Like the other U.S. armed forces, the Navy and Marine Corps have witnessed a significant rise in the numbers of personnel opting to ride motorcycles over the last decade. An overwhelmingly youthful workforce (80 percent of service personnel are under the age of 30) combined with a tough economy, the adventurous spirit of sailors and Marines, and the amazing performance-for-the-dollar offered by modern motorcycles makes the attraction of two-wheeled motoring particularly powerful.

But the expansion of military motorcyclists has come at a cost, both in terms of safety and readiness. And while the percentage of mishaps among Navy and Marine riders was no higher than that found in the civilian population, Navy leaders recognized something had to be done to improve safety.

In 2007 the Naval Safety Center (NSC) launched a multi-pronged effort to improve motorcycle safety. One initiative was the expansion of the Motorcycle Safety Specialist billet – an odd sounding position for a service which operates primarily in a marine environment. It might sound strange but it's a natural for the NSC, Don Borkoski maintains.

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"The whole principle behind the Naval Safety Center is trying to promote safety through education, engineering and information to improve readiness. If we lose 33 guys in a year, that's a substantial impact to military readiness and huge loss of investment. The Navy realized that more than 50 percent of the people the service loses are lost in their off-duty time, not on the job. We want to help put a stop to that."

Prior to 2008, sailors and Marines were required to wear a helmet and receive basic motorcycle training. Beyond those measures, the Navy had no widely standardized policy in place and according to Borkoski the relationship between riders and Navy leadership was frequently adversarial.

"There was a move afoot several years before I arrived here to do away with motorcycle riders. It made no sense. It was like saying, 'Let's do away with the kind of people we want in the service.' We want the adventurers, the guys that want to get out there and go. We want them to do their jobs and fight wars and yet we don't want them riding motorcycles on their own time?"

Gradually service leaders recognized that wagging a finger at riders wasn't paying off. Overbearing and poorly coordinated rules for motorcycling, particularly on-base, angered and confused sailors and Marines, says Borkoski, and "they stopped listening." The alternative was to accept personnel who chose to ride.

A significant step in that direction was made in late 2007 with the creation of the Military Sport Bike Rider Course (MSRC); a program aimed the largest segment of riders in the USN/USMC – sport bikers. Weighing in at less than 500 pounds and endowed with as much as 200 hp, many modern sport bikes have thrust-to-weight ratios that surpass even those of exotic cars.

"You can buy a sport bike for \$8,000 and get an amazing adrenaline rush," Borkoski notes. "Think about putting it in the hands of an 18 to 25-year old, the kind of people we rely on for military service."

The idea of the MSRC was to embrace the riders of these "pocket rockets" and use training and their enthusiasm to help create a cultural shift toward safety.

"We realized that 88 percent of our motorcycle fatalities were on sport bikes. Our question was, 'Is it these bikes causing accidents or their riders?' We quickly learned it was not the bikes themselves, it was that our riding population didn't really know how to ride these motorcycles. Even for those guys with fundamental motorcycle training, climbing onto a sport bike is like taking a pilot who can fly a Cessna and putting them into an F/A-18. It just doesn't work."



**Lt. Cmdr. Todd Kline practices maneuvering turns during the 2010 Naval Station Rota Motorcycle Safety Rally. The event was sponsored by the Naval Station Rota Safety department to improve motorcycle safety by concentrating on the basic skills necessary for safe and fun motorcycle riding. U.S. Navy photo by Lt. Ben Tisdale**

Naval Air Stations and Air Force bases were utilized by the Sports Car Club of America just after World War II.

"The Marines have led the way," Borkoski affirms. "They use Keith and Dylan Code from the California Superbike School and Kevin Schwantz' [Grand Prix motorcycle champion] School. Both of those teams have been helping us develop our own advanced rider course, so now with the MSRC we have fundamental, intermediate and advanced riding courses."

The Navy also now has a publication that caters to motorcycle riders, *Smart Ride*. Launched in 2008 by the NSC, the magazine takes its cue from *Approach*, the Center's outstanding and long lived (since 1956) aviation safety publication.



**Sailors assigned to Naval Air Station Whidbey Island listen to Shawn Olsen, a Navy and Marine Corps traffic safety program instructor, before riding through a basic obstacle course. The basic rider course is aimed at individuals with little or no riding experience and is designed to provide the basic skills needed to operate a motorcycle safely and competently. U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Nardel Gervacio**

Despite initial skepticism from the Navy, the program has taken off. Today, all major Navy and Marine Corps installations offer the MSRC. Developed by the NSC in conjunction with the Motorcycle Safety Foundation (a civilian, non-profit organization sponsored by domestic and international motorcycle manufacturers), the course is taught by contracted, qualified instructors at motorcycle ranges on USN/USMC bases and at nearby DMV ranges.

"From 2008 to 2009, in the program's first year, our fatalities went down by 60 percent in the Navy," Borkoski reports.

So successful is the MSRC that the Army and Air Force are incorporating it as well. Meanwhile, the Marine Corps has gone even further, hosting track days for sport bikers on base – a move that harkens back to the roots of American road racing, when

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"Approach is a magazine that works well because 95 percent of every issue is written by aviators for aviators," says *Smart Ride* editor April Phillips. "We wanted our magazine to be by riders for riders."

The emphasis of *Smart Ride* is on information sharing, Phillips stresses. But unlike its sister publication, *Smart Ride* is not devoted exclusively to cautionary tales.

"We want the magazine to provide a wide range of information," she explains. "We have stories that aren't necessarily about safety and risk management. There are also enthusiast features on responsibly modifying your bike, for instance."

In addition to stories from sailors and Marines, there are features with some of the most accomplished motorcycle racers around, including Kevin Schwantz and current AMA Superbike star Blake Young. Starting in 2012 there will be a regular column by a "fleet editor."

"We have a sailor in Rota, Spain who is really into track days and loves working with other riders," Phillips reveals. "I've decided to use him as much as I can and we've created a position called 'Fleet Editor'."

That's the kind of involvement that Borkoski, Phillips and the NSC hope to see more of. Motorcycle clubs are now allowed in most naval commands and encouraged aboard fleet vessels. There's a definite cultural shift in favor of motorcycles. Mentorship will be the key for safety among the service's growing population of riders and the increasing numbers across the armed forces.

"Based on our information, about nine to ten percent of the military population now rides motorcycles – that's a huge number we can't afford to ignore," says Don Borkoski. "Training makes mentorship contagious. If older guys who ride well and have been through these courses can get young guys onboard, the young people realize how cool it is. But you can't get to the track or racing experience level until you work your way up through the training. So now we have that peer pressure working for us instead of against us."

Borkoski says that the services themselves are now working as peers with DoD to come up with a standardized motorcycle policy.

"I think you'll see a coordinated program for motorcycle safety by 2012 which covers training requirements, the safety equipment riders must wear and standards at installations across the military."

Just as importantly, the NSC is working with Navy and Marine Corps installations to standardize rules on base for motorcycle riders so that same rules apply at every station.

"We're not trying to make things difficult for our riders," Borkoski stresses. "In the past, we put too many inconsistent requirements on our riders. Now we recognize that the most important issue is training. That's what makes a smart rider."

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