



## A Brief History of EMS Cycling

by **Maureen Becker**

*IPMBA Executive Director*

The history of EMS cycling is not as well-documented as that of police cycling, but the *Complete Guide to Public Safety Cycling* provides a foundation for further research. It is likely that the first “EMS bikes” were bike-powered ambulances used by the military, such as the one



shown here, from World War II. The first “modern” bike medics were likely deployed during special events as an alternative to walking, and quickly proved to be an effective means of overcoming the crowds and traffic that inhibit timely response to medical emergencies.

Several colleges and universities began using bikes in the 1980’s, but mostly just for transportation.

Members of the Indianapolis Fire

Department likewise started using their own bikes at special events because, according to a former member, they “got tired of walking.” The department purchased their first bikes in about 1984 and a bike team was in operation by 1989. In 1991, Denver Health Paramedic (shown at right with the Stealth Bomber) formed one of the first officially organized EMS bike teams.



British Columbia Ambulance Service (photo at left) implemented the Advanced Life Support Bike Squad in 1993, as a pilot program during a fireworks event attracting crowds of 150,000 people. Due to the success of the pilot, which continued throughout the summer, the program was quickly expanded throughout the province.

The BC Ambulance Service program was used as the model for the creation of the Troy (OH) Fire Department and East Baton Rouge EMS (LA) bike teams in 1994. In Troy, two paramedics staffed mountain bikes carrying

both BLS and ALS equipment, an abbreviated drug bag, intubation supplies, and a cardiac monitor.

One of these paramedics, Jim Bowell, later became IPMBA's president. He and his colleague, Doug Ingle, provided their own bikes, but the rest of the equipment was furnished by the department and the local hospital. The team was rounded out by paramedics Jeff Shelton and Brad Ray.

In 1996, the Lebanon, OH, fire division established a bike medic team for Applefest; Fremont, CA, launched a bike team for the Fourth of July; and both Boston and Toronto began bike operations. By 1997, EMS bike units could be found in Alexandria, VA; Gaston County, NC; and Lakewood, CO.

Although most US-based medical bike units are used primarily for special events, some have been deployed on a more routine basis. The first EMS bike team in Florida was founded in 1995 by Orange County Fire-Rescue to patrol the local bike trails and the International Drive corridor. Orlando Fire Department soon followed suit. In 1997, the Nashville FD began assigning bike medics to patrol the Second Avenue/Printer's Alley district on weekends in response to an incident in which it took an ambulance 25 minutes to penetrate the crowds and reach a heart attack victim. In 2000, the Orlando Fire Department began patrolling the entertainment district from 9pm-3am on Fridays, Saturdays, and holidays. For the first two years after its founding in 1996, the Boston EMS bike team operated on every shift. They now patrol on a less frequent basis, focusing more on supporting large-scale events such as First Night, St. Patrick's Day, and the Boston Marathon.

In 2000, a pilot project launched by the London Ambulance Service (LAS) deployed paramedics on a 10-hour day, 7-day-a-week shift pattern in a five-kilometer area in the heart of the city. The success of the program resulted in the established of a full-time cycle response unit (CRU) that is still expanding throughout the city. Similar CRUs have since been implemented in York, Manchester, and Cardiff, among others, both by the NHS Trust ambulance services and voluntary services such as St. John Ambulance.



EMS cycling has also found a niche within the airport environment, where EMS personnel face the challenges of crowded terminals and heavily trafficked airfields. As early as 1998, Eau Claire Airport (WI) and Vancouver (BC) International Airport deployed medics on bikes. Nashville International Airport has been patrolled by cross-trained first responders since 2000. In 2004, LAS began Cycle Response Unit service in Heathrow Airport, and paramedics took to their bikes at Calgary Airport. Fort Lauderdale Fire Department (photo) launched the airport's "Bike 1" in 2005, and the Los

Angeles Fire Department began a pilot initiative at LAX in 2007.

The application of EMS cyclists has continued to increase, and EMS services now deploy bikes in tourist areas, during special events, in amusement parks and sports arenas, on college campuses, and in airports, train stations, and other transportation hubs. In 2000, the Journal of



Emergency Medical Services' 200-city survey reported that more than 300 bike medic teams were in operation across the US and that 52% of EMS agencies in the nation's largest 200 cities had established EMS bike teams.

Bicycles continue to be used to power ambulances in developing nations, such as this one in Malawi provided by Bicycles Without Borders.

© 2013 IPMBA.