

TEAMWORK



Special teams provide mission-critical resources

Policing is, by its nature, a diverse profession. But the jack-of-all-trades approach has its limitations. Special teams are assembled, equipped and trained for situations and environments that demand more than a traditional patrol response can effectively handle. Tactical response, K-9, marine patrol and bicycle teams allow agencies to do more. Here's how.

2-WHEEL RAPID RESPONSE

Effective bike control for organized, mobile protests

BY KIRBY BECK

Bicycle Rapid Response Teams (BRRTs) have been gaining recognition as one of the most effective means of controlling crowds. The approachability and mobility that make bike officers popular for routine patrol have proven equally valuable during protests and other potentially volatile gatherings.

We're all familiar now with the Occupy Wall Street movement. Much of what we have seen there was presaged by the September 2008 Republican National Committee convention (RNC) in Saint Paul, Minn. Like most political conventions, the delegates and candidates weren't the only people planning to attend.

Joining them would be groups of anarchists, quasi-professional protestors and organizers determined to disrupt the convention, together with a large number of well-meaning citizens eager to be heard. Many were merely "useful idiots," ready to be swayed by crowds and prevailing sentiment.

A segment of these folks came prepared and determined to wreak as much damage and disruption as they could. Many were highly organized, using smart phones, social networks and other modern communications, combined with tactics nearly on par with those of the police.

Part of their plan was to use "hit-and-run" tactics designed to strike quickly and unpredictably and then retreat before police could respond. The intent was to keep police off-balance and distracted. The result endangered people and property in Saint Paul.

The Response

Traditional means of controlling crowds by deploying a mobile strike force in hard protective gear has proven too

slow for high-tech, highly mobile groups of troublemakers and criminals. By the time the team marches or is transported to the area, the damage is done, the leaders are gone and there's little use for the "hard force."

The antidote to these highly mobile tactics: police bicycles, staffed by specially trained teams of riders, are able to quickly move into position despite crowds or traffic. Though lightly equipped, in normal bike patrol uniforms, BRRT members carry gas masks and large canisters of chemical irritant—and occasionally other less-lethal weaponry—to help them block, reroute or control unruly crowds until the "hard platoons" arrive, if they're needed at all.

BRRTs were first popularized for crowd-control duty before the 2000 election, when Los Angeles hosted the Democratic National Convention and Philadelphia hosted the RNC. In L.A., the mobile strike force was rarely needed: The bike teams squelched most problems before they could even deploy! In one memorable article written by columnist Bob Lonsberry in the midst of the RNC, Philadelphia's bicycle response teams were deemed worthy to guard the gates of heaven.

The bikes are the key to their mobility and to their capacity to block off an area. Bikes are more than mere transportation. They're a valuable police tool. Overlapped, like Spartan shields, they provide a formidable barricade to protestors and a barrier of protection for the officers. Picked up and thrust forward in unison, they move a crowd back. Most valuable perhaps is the bike team's ability to be where they're needed immediately.

Bike teams can patrol designated areas, ready to identify or respond to rapidly developing trouble spots. They

can shadow groups, provide surveillance and report to commanders. BRRT patrols can be divided into smaller groups to enhance coverage or quickly merged into larger teams to meet the needs of dynamic and ever-changing situations. Perhaps one of the slickest uses of a BRRT is as an arrest team. Because they're able to move into a crowd quickly, quietly and with less commotion, the bike team can swoop in, surround a suspect or provocateur, effect the arrest and quickly extract them under the protection of a moving bicycle barricade.

Bike teams use formations and tactics (lines, wedges, slants, etc.) employed by other crowd control teams, but do them while riding police bikes. Therefore, the riders must be both proficient in police bike skills—including slow speed and precision bike handling, even while wearing a gas mask—and trained to operate as a coordinated and cohesive crowd control unit. They do this through simple verbal and whistle commands and hours of practice and scenarios.

Before the 2008 RNC in Saint Paul, the Saint Paul PD partnered with bike teams from Minneapolis, as well as a few suburban departments to select, equip and train roughly 120 bike officers, forming 8–11 officer teams. A sergeant and a squad leader, usually an experienced and trusted officer, led each team. Training went on for several months. It involved group riding, communication and tactics, learning to ride and perform with gas masks deployed, and scenarios implementing "gas," noise and the commotion they expected to encounter.

Throughout the media's coverage of the RNC events, the bike teams were omnipresent. It seemed that nearly every time the media filmed some sort of skirmish, the bike teams were in the middle of it. Many clips are still available on YouTube and on the official RNC Commission Report and Executive Summary (www.stpaul.gov/index.aspx?NID=2901).

Bike team leaders reported throughout the week that they knew BRRTs and their tactics would work, but they were surprised at how well they worked. Bike teams literally kept the city from being destroyed—and the citizens knew it. Many bike team members were pleasantly surprised when pedestrians would stop and applaud as they rode by in formation.

Perhaps the best demonstration of their success followed a particularly long day of dangerous confrontations. At one point, the bicycle response teams had moved in to reinforce a "hard platoon" of mobile strike force officers overwhelmed

in their battle with protestors. The addition of BRRT members enabled them to hold their positions and prevent injuries to officers.

Later that day, as the BRRT members rode into a staging area wearing their modest bike uniforms, duty belts and bike helmets, the mobile strike force members—decked out in riot helmets, shields and complete riot pads—stood and



St. Paul police officers push back a group of protesters who were using a large sign during an anti-war protest at the Republican National Convention in St. Paul, Minn., Monday, Sept. 1, 2008.

spontaneously began chanting, "Bert! Bert! Bert!" To have their peers, many of them battle-hardened SWAT and tactical guys, heap praise on these guys and gals "riding bikes and wearing shorts," proved beyond question BRRT's effectiveness and value.

Conclusion

As is the case with most aspects of law enforcement, training is the key to a successful BRRT. High-quality training in bicycle rapid response will be offered during the International Police Mountain Bike Association's (IPMBA) 2012 Conference. It will be held, coincidentally, in Saint Paul, Minn., April 30–May 2, 2012. For more information, visit www.ipmba.org.

KIRBY BECK is a retired police officer and current IPMBA Instructor-Trainer. As a resident of the Twin Cities, he has trained with the Bicycle Response Team trainers and watched with interest the team's success during the 2008 RNC in Saint Paul.



Check Kirby Beck's article "Up & Rolling," about how to start a police bicycle unit, exclusively at LawOfficer.com.