

Joe, The Recycled Recruit

This is a story about Joe, the recycled recruit, his on-the-job driver education and the day he put on an auto thrill show for some local residents.

Before I get into the actual event, I need to explain a little about rural policing tactics and, for those who weren't troopers, about the recruit training process.

First, rural policing. Most troopers at one time or other have had an unhappy motorist say to them "why aren't you out catching crooks rather than picking on us law abiding citizens?" The motorists probably wouldn't be too flattered to know that that might just be the reason we stopped them; it's part of the way we catch crooks.

"How does picking on motorists stop crime?" you ask. Well, out here in rural New York State, both the evil doers and the troopers are spread over a large area. Since horses have pretty much gone by the wayside, both sides now depend on motor vehicles.

For example, let's assume that little Johnny Jones, having graduated from high school - or, more likely, having been thrown out of high school - aspires to be a burglar. Unless he has access to a car, his career development isn't going to go too well. For starters, it's pretty hard to bring home a 54 inch flat screen TV on a bicycle. More importantly, however, is that the Residential Burglary Pin Map in the barracks is going to take on the appearance of an archery target with guess who living at the bull's-eye?

So Johnny finds wheels. (Having the car registered and/or having a driver's license are optional.) This is where aggressive - and I mean that in a good way - patrolling comes into play. Unless we get a tip or a phone call, the chances of catching a burglar in the act are slim. Not unheard of, but slim. So, rather than wandering around pastures turning over flat rocks looking for crooks underneath, we

start stopping cars, but we try to do it in an organized, intelligent manner; to wit: we try to develop some criminal intelligence to help us make good choices as to whom we should be stopping.

When Sherlock Holmes needed to find out what was going on out on the street, he turned to the "Baker Street Irregulars". Our equivalent was the "RFD Regulars", rural letter carriers, newspaper delivery people, the highway department guys, milk tanker drivers, large animal vets - upstanding citizens who were out there everyday, and often at night. Had they noticed anything or anyone out of the ordinary?

Additionally, most troopers had their own sources of information. The farther we got off the beaten path during our routine patrols, the more likely it was that we might come across a car which was a treasure trove of violations: unregistered, uninsured, switched plates, no inspection and a fistful of lesser violations. Often the driver's operators license, if he had ever had one, was suspended or revoked.

Sometimes these people were hard core miscreants and we would hammer them with tickets, impound their car and possibly even cart them off to jail. But more often it was some poor guy to whom life had, at least for the time being, dealt a bad hand - laid off from work and no way to pay for food or rent, or a sick kid and no cash for medicine. Money for car insurance or license plates was way down on his priority list. The guy was just doing what he had to do to get on with life.

Usually we cut these guys considerable slack, letting the heavy duty violations slide, maybe giving them a token ticket for a minor violation and sending them off with "Go my son and sin no more", knowing full well that they would be sinning again as soon as we were out of sight. We knew they had to do whatever they needed to do to get by. The next time our paths crossed many of them were our new best friends - and they had a much better idea of what was going on in the neighborhood than we did.

We also benefitted from the fact that most crooks seemed to be specialists. We would go for months with no significant crimes of any kind in our patrol area, then someone would get let out of jail or move into the neighborhood or branch out into our area and we would experience a spate of crimes. But usually the new bad guys would only engage in their specialty: burglarizing post offices or gas stations or stealing pay phones or breaking into night deposit drops or growing marihuana - whatever they were good at. This enabled us to concentrate our attention, particularly that of the night patrols, on certain areas.

One crime to which the troopers took particular offence was residential burglary. Not only was there an economic impact on the victims, but also a psychological one. I was looking for burglars the day I inherited Joe, the recycled recruit.

A few words about the recruit training process. By the time a recruit had gone through the multi-faceted selection process and then completed the six month, live-in, military style academy, most of the misfits had either packed it in of their own volition or had been weeded out by the academy staff and/or academic standards. Then came the second stage of their probationary period, riding with a senior man (now called a Field Training Officer) for six weeks or so.

I considered being chosen as a senior man an honor. I found that I always worked a little harder, stopped a few more cars, worked investigations a little harder and took more care with my reports when I had a recruit looking over my shoulder.

As time progressed, the senior man allowed the recruit to do more and more by himself until one day he tossed the car keys to the recruit and said "Kid, go make the world safe for democracy."

Even during the second stage of training, sometimes either the recruit or the senior man, or both, realized that this job wasn't for them. No amount of field training was going to make the recruit ready.

Even more rare was the second stage probationary trooper who wasn't ready to be turned loose at the end of six weeks, but might be salvageable with more training. Joe was such a recruit. In fact he had been through two six week phases with different senior troopers and I was his final hope.

My previous recruit had been number one in his class and was a star. Perhaps my bosses had assigned him to me in the hope that he could teach me something. Joe was going to be a different story.

One of Joe's biggest problems was his driving, and that's what we do. Did I mention that Joe was raised in the Bronx? I'm not sure how Joe heard about the state police, but he took the test and passed. When he realized he might be hired, he figured he better get a driver's license, since it was a job requirement. Joe apparently went to the Wiley Coyote School for gypsy cabbies, pizza delivery guys, getaway drivers and trooper applicants. Unfortunately Joe hadn't had the time to take the semester on winter driving.

Winter driving: In the '60s and '70s many highway department used little if any salt on winter roads. Sand or cinders were the norm and roads were often covered with ice or hard packed snow for weeks at a time. Also, back then virtually all cars were rear wheel drive. Combine these factors with a 375 horsepower engine and the prudent application of power to the rear wheels became critical - but it could also be useful. I'm not suggesting that we drove like we were on a Formula One racetrack, doing four wheel drifts into every curve, but we frequently executed low speed U turns on slippery roads simply by cranking the steering wheel to the left and tapping the gas peddle. The front end remained more or less stationary and the rear end pivoted around. In a single car length you were headed the other way.

Back to Joe. It was my first day with Joe and I opted to drive since we had had a week of snow. We were stopped at a rural stop sign when a car approached from the opposite direction. There were two kids in the car and a large console TV set in the back seat. TV sets had been popular loot recently. Not having seen any Sears' Flyers in the newspaper announcing a giant appliance giveaway, I figured

this might be worth checking out. When they passed by us I eased out into the empty intersection, cranked the wheels to the left and tapped the gas pedal. We did a quick one eighty and were now following the kids' car. When I reached over to turn on the roof light I noticed that Joe had a look of terror on his face and had embedded his fingers in the dashboard padding up to the first joints.

When the car pulled over I told Joe to exit and walk up to the right rear window of the car while I talked to the driver. The kids produced a bill showing they had picked up the TV set from a repair shop and were taking it home and I sent them on their way.

By the time we got back to the troop car, Joe realized that skidding the rear end around had been intentional. "Gee Trooper Scribner, can you teach me to do that?" I told Joe to stop calling me Trooper Scribner, he wasn't in the Academy anymore, and yes, we'd work on his driving.

On the following Sunday we went over to the parking lot at Valley Central High School. The lot was empty and was covered with hard packed snow. Picking an area far removed from light poles, I had Joe practice everything I could think of involving winter driving. I'm sure passing motorists wondered what the hell we were doing. Joe seemed to catch on.

A week or so later Joe was driving when we entered the Hamlet of Bullville. Hamlet is kind of an overstatement. Perhaps crossroads would be a better definition. Bullville consisted of a feed store, a post office, a gas station and Lunney's, a small luncheonette frequented by dairy farmers who had come into town to pick up their mail and maybe some feed. We drove up to the crossroads from the south and stopped at a stop sign. The gas station was on our left on the near side of the intersection and Lunney's was on the far right corner. I directed Joe's attention to the car facing us at the opposing stop sign.

"Joe, what do you notice about that car?"

"He stopped for the stop sign?"

"Well, I guess that's true, but no, that's not what I meant. It has New York plates but a New Jersey inspection sticker."

"Is that illegal?"

"I don't think there's a specific statute prohibiting it, but it might be worth checking out."

By now the car had started up from the stop sign, crossed the intersection and was passing us headed in the opposite direction. The driver's eyes were locked straight ahead. Joe looked out at the broad, empty, snow covered intersection in front of us. We needed to make a U turn.

Joe looked at me and, obviously thinking back on our hours of practice, asked "Now?"

"Now Joe."

Joe pulled out into the intersection, cranked the front wheels to the left and floored the accelerator. He couldn't have hit the pedal any harder if he had used both feet. He kept it floored. We did an instantaneous 360 degrees and were well into our second go-round when the troop car slid backwards out of the intersection, through a snow bank and into the parking lot of the luncheonette. The farmers inside plastered themselves against Lunney's picture window with looks of wonderment on their faces. With their flannel shirts, bib overalls and gaping mouths, collectively they looked like a Norman Rockwell painting.

When we came to a stop, Joe was holding onto the steering wheel with a death grip and still had the gas pedal floored. I reached over and turned off the ignition, then told Joe to pop the hood. Eventually he returned to the real world and pulled the release. I jumped out of the passenger's door, opened the hood and had reached between the air cleaner and the intake manifold by the time the first farmer stuck his head under the hood. "Damn throttle return spring popped off" I lied. He nodded knowingly and mumbled something about "MOPARs" as he wandered off. I had pretty much

framed the Chrysler Corporation, but they didn't have to work here. I did. Then Joe stuck his head under the hood. "Gee Trooper Scribner, can you teach me to do that?" I wasn't sure what he was referring to, but I said "No Joe, I can't."

In the coming weeks the weather improved and so did Joe's driving, although it never reached the stage where riding with him during a high speed chase was for the faint of heart. After conferring with my superiors and Joe's previous senior men, we decided that Joe could be salvaged. He was turned loose with the understanding that we had to find a place for him off the road before the snowflakes flew again. Joe found a home working undercover narcotics and sitting on wiretaps. He retired after a twenty year career.

I later heard that after Joe retired he took a job driving a commuter bus to New York City. I'm guessing that he never encountered a situation where he felt he had to turn the bus around in a single bus length, because if he had I'm sure I would have turned on the TV that night and seen Wolf Blitzer reporting from the scene.