



One of three motorcycles in the Salem Division Motor Unit.

New Hat, New Ride for Troopers in Southwest Virginia

By Lindsey Nair

Officials said the motorcycles could more easily navigate congested traffic to reach an accident.

Some state police troopers are hanging up their Smokey Bear hats for a CHiPS helmet.

On Thursday, the Virginia State

Police announced the start of motorcycle patrols on Interstate 81 and in the Salem division and Interstate 581. It is the first time that troopers have gone

two-wheeling in this part of the state.

“We’re going to start out small, but eventually we hope to see eight or 10 guys out there,” said Trooper Mike Keen. ➤

Virginia State Police spokesman Sgt. Tom Foster said the motorcycles will be a good addition to enforcement efforts for many reasons. For one thing, motorists do not notice the bikes like they do police cruisers and therefore are more likely to get caught driving unsafely.

Also, traffic on Interstate 81 gets congested quickly, particularly when a crash has occurred, and motorcycle units will be better able to maneuver around that.

"It gets gridlocked and sometimes it's difficult to get there," Foster said. "Cars pull off on the shoulder ... and next thing you know, nothing's getting through."

The motorcycles will have first aid equipment on them, making it faster and easier to get medical help to victims in need.

Keen is the first motorcycle trooper to take to the streets because he is experienced, having patrolled on one for five years when stationed in Northern Virginia. Before Salem joined the list, the state police had motorcycle units only in Richmond, Hampton Roads and Northern Virginia, Foster said.

Those units are used primarily to maneuver through heavy traffic in metropolitan areas.

After going through a re certification procedure, Keen began patrolling I-81 and I-581 about a week ago. He said he's had a good time so far and has surprised people when he's pulled them over on the motorcycle.

"They're not used to seeing us out

there, and I've been getting some looks from people like, 'Whoa!'" he said.

Trooper Matt Brannock and Sgt. Dan Jessee will soon complete the necessary training to do motorcycle patrols, and the three troopers will make up the initial unit, with Jessee as the supervisor. All three men ride motorcycles on their personal time, and Keen said troopers will be chosen based on their ability to ride.

Keen jokes a little about the Kawasaki that he rides for the state police. He owns a Harley Davidson himself and prefers them.

"Well, naturally I would," he said with a smile.

But he is in luck, because Foster said at some point the Kawasakis will be replaced with Harleys.

The three Kawasakis are used state police bikes from elsewhere in the state that were given to the Salem division to get its program started. State police have begun to purchase nothing but Harley Davidsons for their patrols because they have better resale value and require less maintenance.

When all three motorcycles are up and running later this month, the officers will be able to do everything from running radar and pacing cars to giving chase when a motorist attempts to flee.

Keen said his family is no more concerned about him now that he

is patrolling on a motorcycle.

"In this line of work, everybody's going to worry," he said.

The decision to start motorcycle patrols is yet another effort to increase safety on I-81 in the Roanoke Valley. Also on Thursday, state police announced along with the Virginia Department of Transportation and the Department of Motor Vehicles that a 15-mile section of the interstate has been designated a "safety enforcement zone."

The designation is a result of a law passed by the 2003 General Assembly.

The groups unveiled large, bright yellow signs that warn drivers of higher fines in the corridor, which stretches from mile marker 127 near Ironto in Montgomery County to mile marker 142 near Salem. Speeding fines will double from \$5 for each mile over the limit to \$10. Criminal offenses such as reckless driving or drunken driving could result in fines up to \$2,500.

"Sure, it's going to increase some revenue, but that's not the important thing," said Roanoke County Commonwealth's Attorney Randy Leach. "The important thing is that it's going to slow people down."

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State Police Bring Motorcycle Patrols to Roanoke Valley

Salem, VA – The Virginia State Police are adding a new weapon to their arsenal of highway safety enforcement tools. Although motorcycle patrols have played a major role in state police traffic enforcement in other parts of Virginia, the inclusion of motor patrols is a first for the Salem Division Headquarters.

The State Police Motorcycle Patrol traces its origins to the 1920's when statewide traffic enforcement was the responsibility of the Department of Motor Vehicles. The "mechanical mule," as it was called by early State Troopers, remained a major method of police patrol for the first thirty years of state police operation.

The Virginia State Police "Motor Unit" was re-established by the department in 1986 and has been a major patrol component in the Richmond, Tidewater and Northern Virginia areas. The Salem Division Motor Unit will begin with three motorcycles and the program may expand in the future.

The motorcycles will be used for traffic enforcement on I-81 and I-581 and will be utilized on other area roadways as needed. They will also play a major role in traffic management during Virginia Tech home football games, the Martinsville and Bristol NASCAR races and other area special assignments.

Motorcycle units, circa 1932.



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