11-15 - Seatbelts and Radio Cars

Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department
NEWSLETTER
Field Operations Support Services, (323) 890-5411

SEATBELTS AND RADIO CARS

Sergeant Dave Sauer of Palmdale Station has written an article regarding the use and safety of seatbelts while driving and/or riding in a radio car. This article was published in the Star News and is posted on www.habitsforsurvival.com. The article not only stresses the wearing of seatbelts, but also gives reasons and statistics directly related to radio cars as to why seatbelts should be worn while driving and/or riding in a radio car. Although this article is directed at driving and riding in a radio car, the article also pertains to all drivers and passengers whether you are driving or riding in a Department vehicle or a personal vehicle.

Habits for Survival

Stupid is as Stupid Does

“Cops are not immune from making mistakes. The problem is, some mistakes can get you killed or seriously hurt. A bigger problem is when the same mistake keeps getting made over and over again, resulting in continued injuries and death. A HUGE problem is when the mistake becomes a culturally inbred tradition and is actually taught to new officers as the expected and acceptable way of doing things. I really want to try and put this in perspective for you. Imagine a new patrol deputy on his or her first day of training; that first day in a radio car with the Field Training Officer(FTO); the person to whom the new deputy will look, listen and learn from how to do the job and how to stay alive. Imagine the FTO looks over at the new trainee and says,"What’s that under your shirt?"

"My vest?" the trainee answers unsurely.

"Take that off" barks the FTO, "we don’t wear those in patrol." The FTO points to green FLAK vests in the trunk and says, "We’ll put these on if the situation looks like we’ll need it."

“What would you say to the FTO? If you were the Training Sergeant how fast would you bench the FTO from having any more trainees? If you were an FTO and heard one of your peers teaching this would you try to straighten him out? If you were the trainee, would you follow the FTO’s counsel and example, knowing it was foolhardy?

“Of course the mistake I am referring to is not the above scenario. It is worse! Worse because it causes more officer injuries and death than not wearing a vest would. Worse because this mistake is also against the law and against policy. Worse because we do it to ourselves; we have no one else to blame. I know the reason we do it and the reason is stupid! But we can fix it.

“Now I plead with you to read on with an open mind and consider the facts and ask yourself if we can do better; if *you* can do better; if *you* can make a difference in changing our culture. Please resist the urge to dismiss my plea without giving it serious introspective, logical thought. Please don’t let ego keep you from getting better. I have already saved some lives; I want *us* to save more.

“A report by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration published earlier this year on law enforcement accident related deaths, shows 274 officers were killed nationwide from 2000-2008. The percentage of those wearing their seatbelt dropped to 50% from 56% for the prior decade. Not wearing seatbelts and speed are the two primary causal factors of fatal collisions for police. We seem to be

doing worse than the national average. Traffic Services Detail investigates on duty deputy involved traffic accidents which involve injury or death. Since January 2010 to March 05, 2011, they have responded to 35 such accidents. In all but one, deputies were NOT wearing their seatbelt! I have talked to enough deputies about this to learn three things: 1: Not wearing a seatbelt is being taught by FTO’s to trainees; 2: The reason is deputies think that wearing their seatbelt may get them killed because they can’t get out of their car fast enough in the event of ambush or attack; and 3: Deputies say, and think, they will put on their seatbelt when rolling Code 3. Let’s look at the facts.

“The idea that deputies will put on their seatbelt when rolling Code 3 is not supported by the facts nor by logic. It is as illogical as carrying your vest in the trunk and thinking you’ll put it on when you need it. When the adrenaline kicks in and you have to get on the radio and pay attention to what’s going on, often the last thought is putting on a seatbelt; especially if wearing a seatbelt is not already a habit. Of the 35 injury accidents referred to above, 19 were rolling Code-3. I’m sure those deputies would have said if asked beforehand, "I wear my seatbelt when rolling Code."

“The idea that wearing a seatbelt can get you killed is not unique to our department; it seems to be industry wide. However, the facts do not support the fear. I have looked hard and cannot find a single incident in which wearing a seatbelt either contributed to crash related injuries, or trapped an officer in the car resulting in him or her getting attacked or killed. Not a single one! Anywhere! It just does not

happen. An irrational fear not supported by fact is a phobia. On the other hand, there is much and mounting evidence of the life saving benefits of wearing a seatbelt. Some years ago I wrote an article similar to this one encouraging the use of seatbelts. A deputy from Century Station later called to thank me for saving his life. He shared that he and his partner did not have the habit of wearing their

seatbelt. They read the article and talked about it and made the decision to start. Seventeen minutes after making that decision they were broadsided going through an intersection. Their car was totaled, but they walked away from it with only bumps and bruises. The deputy told me he’s sure they would have been killed or seriously injured had they not been wearing their seatbelts.

“Imagine how happy I was to hear that story knowing something I did contributed to saving the lives of two deputies! Imagine how one would feel if someone he or she taught not to wear a seatbelt was killed or seriously injured as a result. This is the root of our industrywide problem. New trainees are being taught by their Training Officers not to wear their seatbelt when on patrol. Many FTO’s will try to

justify their error by saying they leave the decision up to the trainee. Yeah...right. We all know how it works. It doesn’t matter what you *say*, it is what you *do* that teaches. Trainees look to the example of their FTO and other experienced deputies for what the expected standard of performance is. We don’t have a problem with officers not wearing their vest, or carrying a back-up gun, because it is expected by the group so new officers conform to the standard. To go against the norm would bring disapproval and even ridicule. Wearing a seatbelt must become the norm, the expected standard, and this is the responsibility of FTO’s first. Teach our new deputies that it is an easy habit to learn. Teach them how to remove their belt when around the corner from a call; when they activate the lights for a T-stop; when turning off the main highway into the neighborhood looking for bad guys.

“Absent the internal discipline of our FTO force to do this, external discipline will be necessary. Training Sergeants and Field Sergeants, it doesn’t matter what you say, only what you do. Please do something. Lieutenants, hold your Sergeants accountable for doing something. Captains, make it clear to your staff that wearing seatbelts is a priority and hold them accountable for doing something, not just saying it; because we’ve been saying it for a long time and nothing is changing. One out of 35!

“The political and economic writing is on the wall. The time is soon coming when a deputy who is injured in an accident and not wearing his or her seatbelt will be fighting a legal battle for their worker’s compensation benefits and they will lose. The jury will find the deputy violated policy and violated the law and caused or contributed to his or her own injury, therefore the public is not responsible for paying for those injuries. When this happens, those responsible for teaching this deputy a better habit will have violated their duty and be a contributing factor as well. Don’t let it be you. Keep the faith... and slow down and wear your seatbelt.”

In addition to the above article, Traffic Services Detail has created a PowerPoint entitled "*Deputy Involved Collisions*" which highlights the need to wear seatbelts. The PowerPoint can be viewed on Field Operations Support Services' website. This PowerPoint uses actual Department radio car collisions to emphasize the wearing of seatbelts.

Information regarding the content of this newsletter may be directed to Field Operations Support Services.