

# Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Mentoring

story and photo by  
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## Did you know?

*"If a motorcycle accident occurs and results in injury or death and it's determined that proper training or wear of personal protective equipment wasn't implemented, squadron commanders have the authority to force an active duty member to pay their own medical expenses — or worse, deny death benefits to a surviving family."*

— Master Sgt. Kani Nichols,  
37th Training Wing  
motorcycle safety coordinator

**A**s an airman first class stationed in the Midwest in 1985, I remember waking up one warm spring day with the irresistible urge to rapidly propel myself across Nebraska's vast, cornfield-sewn landscape at break-neck speed. I soon found myself at a local motorcycle shop drooling over a jet black, shaft-driven Honda CX650 custom cruiser.

There's no doubt in my mind that if I'd been carrying enough cash, I would've driven the bike off the show room floor and straight into the street where I would've killed myself before ever reaching the front gate of Offutt Air Force Base.

Instead, as a 21-year-old having no established credit, I was forced to wait eight paychecks before I could gather the funds to pay the balance on the bike. During those next four months, I had the incredible fortune of meeting and forming a friendship with an older noncommissioned officer who was not only a seasoned motorcyclist but also a coach and mentor.

Doing more than just recommending a good full-faced helmet, this guy insisted that I ride backseat on his BMW touring bike to experience, first-hand, what it's like to drive in a world dominated by four-wheeled motorists. Later he enrolled me in the base's beginner riding course and remained a regular riding partner throughout what eventually became 18 months of accident-free riding during my Nebraska tour.

Now, two decades later, the good news is that growing numbers of Air Force motorcyclists needn't look any farther than the front door of their own squadron for such help.

Responding to recent statistics of staggeringly high Air Force motorcycle fatalities — 20 in fiscal 2002 and 24 in fiscal 2003, nearly triple the number of fatalities for the two previous years — Air Force leaders have begun a crusade to bring motorcycle safety awareness into sharp focus at the lowest organizational level. The name of this crusade:

The Motorcycle Mentorship Program.

The concept is simple. Each squadron identifies its most capable and mature riders, based not on age but rather motorcycle operating experience and demonstrated proficiency. This exclusive group, officially labeled as "motorcycle mentors," is charged with keeping its finger on the pulse of the squadron's riding community and must provide a regularly scheduled forum to share information, camaraderie and practical riding experience. With these organized networks of skilled riders in place, it's widely believed that a smarter, more safety-conscious riding community will evolve and fewer lives will be lost.

While some commands are still trying to wrap their arms around this concept, Air Education and Training Command has a firm grasp, the result of a sustained, top-to-bottom directed effort that spans nearly two years in the making.

In an August 2002 memorandum that acknowledged a "three-fold increase" in motorcycle fatalities within his command, Gen. Donald Cook directed his

commanders to establish, among other things, local base motorcycle mentoring programs. The suspense: 30 days.

After receiving that directive through the 37th Training Wing, Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, Master Sgt. Bill James, a four-year-veteran motorcycle safety foundation course instructor, went to work creating the 345th Training Squadron's program.

"The squadron riders first got together to establish a list of mentors and identify our new and inexperienced riders," he said.

Within weeks, squadron bikers were holding regular meetings. By the end of 2002, following their first successful group ride, the 37th Training Wing commander was praising the progress.

As the command mentoring program matured in 2003, stricter criteria better defined the "inexperienced" or "high-risk" riders. Using a questionnaire that's now given to in-processing squadron members, Sergeant James identifies and intercepts "high-risk" riders.

"Anyone owning or expressing an

interest in riding a bike who's under 26, has less than a year's riding experience or possesses a high-performance sport bike is getting face time with the squadron commander. No exceptions."

"Everyone knows that if you're going to have a cultural change, it's got to come from the senior leaders," said Lt. Col. Gregory Hinton, commander of the 345th that trains more than 14,000 students annually.

He described a quarterly fatality briefing where commanders stand before the major command's vice commander via teleconference to explain details of each month's mishaps. "You hear every scenario from the young kid on a sport bike who was drinking, mentally distraught, driving recklessly and lost control, to the older, squared-away noncommissioned officer who was doing all the right things and wearing the right protective equipment when an unsuspecting motorist pulled out in front of him," he said. "The only thing those two scenarios have in common is that there are two dead motorcycle riders.

"We preside over a very large, very young, transient population, who, regrettably, represent a large percentage of the motorcycle fatalities that occur each year. I tell these young motorcyclists that if they don't think what they're doing is inherently dangerous then they need to wake up and smell the coffee. The only way to maintain a high level of motorcycle safety awareness with this group is to stay on message repetitively."

Helping maintain repetitive messages is where the mentors come in. Bikers with less than a year's experience must meet with an appointed mentor each month to discuss safety items such as recent mishaps and causes, local hazards, seasonal conditions, decision-making skills and motorcycle maintenance concerns. During these sessions, new bikers are often recommended to attend either the basic or experienced rider's courses. It's while attending these courses that riders really become enlightened.

"I went into the class thinking, 'There's not much they can teach me,'" said Airman 1st Class Alexander Larsen, a Randolph Air Force Base, Texas, bioenvironmental

technician, who entered the Air Force with about three years of riding experience on his brother's Yamaha Seca 600. "But I was actually surprised." He added that the most valuable lessons learned

were how to better control his bike and stay out of blind spots to remain visible.

New and inexperienced motorcyclists don't always fit the profile of the young, race-ready sport bikers. Lt. Col. Thomas Evans, the assistant chief nurse anesthetist at Lackland's Wilford Hall Medical Center, jokingly suggested that his desire to ride a motorcycle might have stemmed from a mid-life crisis.

"In my line of work, I see and treat a lot of motorcycle injuries which helps to raise my safety awareness," he said. "After taking the base riding course, I find myself scanning ahead, thinking more strategically and planning 'what if' scenarios."

"If new riders see us more experienced guys doing the right thing, hopefully it'll change their mindset," said Sergeant James, who explained that monthly group rides are a good forum for modeling safe riding techniques for new riders.

"It's all about watching your spacing, maintaining a safe speed and keeping an eye on who you're mentoring," said Sergeant James who rides a 1998 Harley Davidson Road King. "We'll keep an experienced rider at the back of the pack to help anyone who has a problem."

I suddenly flashed back to 1985, remembering how heavy my motorcycle felt while pushing it down the lonesome stretch of a hilly country road after running out of gas. When more than an hour and several uninterested four-wheeled motorists had passed, a motorcyclist who I'd never met pulled up and cleverly began siphoning gas out of his fuel tank into an aluminum can he'd found by the road. It was my lucky day.

New motorcyclists today don't have to depend on luck to find an experienced rider to help them out. There's a growing network of seasoned bikers Air Force-wide who are willing to teach safety fundamentals and share their knowledge with anyone who's smart enough to sit and listen. ☺

## For more info

■ Lackland Air Force Base's riding association: [www.greenknights.net](http://www.greenknights.net)

■ Air Education and Training Command's Motorcycle Mentorship Program: contact Master Sgt. Bill James at [bill.james@lackland.af.mil](mailto:bill.james@lackland.af.mil)

■ Safety riding tip of the day: [www.motorcycle-safety.org/pages/tips\\_pages/tips2.asp](http://www.motorcycle-safety.org/pages/tips_pages/tips2.asp), then click on "riding tip of the day"

■ Thorough advice on selecting personal protective equipment: [www.motorcycle-touring.us/gear.htm](http://www.motorcycle-touring.us/gear.htm)

