

I Want to Be a . . . Motorcycle Officer

The worst time to be a motorcycle officer?
“When it’s 32 degrees and raining.”

The best?
“Inauguration. All you are seeing is people [along Pennsylvania Avenue]. It’s the ultimate rush. The whole world is watching.”

— Officer Todd Patterson

D.C. Police Escort and Protect the President

Ask Todd Patterson, a sergeant with the Metropolitan Police Department’s Presidential Motor Unit, to demonstrate the Beehive, the Pitchfork or the Lollipop, and he will smile while slowly shaking his head no.

Those are the names of three motorcycle formations that Patterson and others in his 40-officer unit use when escorting and protecting the president when he leaves the White House. Patterson knows each of these formations well, but he’s too modest to show off. He would rather talk about the men in his unit and their daily efforts to do a tough job well.

Being a motorcycle police officer in the nation’s capital means protecting the president, vice president, guests from other countries and other very important people as they move about town. Some trips are short. Other assignments, such as the presidential inaugural parade, are fairly complicated.

“We’re the only group in the nation that does this regularly,” Patterson says. “Our unit is always in the public eye.”

It takes a lot of preparation and skill to make sure things go smoothly.

Patterson’s motorcycle unit also works large demonstrations, marches, parades, funerals and events at Verizon Center and RFK Stadium. Sometimes an officer patrols crime-ridden neighborhoods and responds to emergencies — all from the back of a gleaming, 800-pound Harley-Davidson.

“I wanted to be a policeman since I was 8 or 9,” says Patterson, now 46. He joined the department in 1985 and served as a patrol officer and detective for about 12 years before becoming a motorcycle officer.

In his current job, Patterson supervises all motorcycle training for the department.

On patrol, motor officers need to be alert at all times for hazards and threats. A key part of Patterson’s job is making sure officers are prepared. “We ride all-year-round,” he says, “and we

train all-year-round.”

The officers know that “any time you put on a uniform, you have to be prepared,” Patterson says. “A lot of times, things come up unexpectedly.”

They have been shot at, attacked with knives and yelled at. All of them have had accidents on their bikes, including being hit by drivers who didn’t see them. Patterson has been struck twice.

The officers take potential dangers in stride. “I don’t ever feel scared at work. I am confident in my ability to handle almost any situation,” Patterson says.

“We adapt. We make things work,” another officer says.

The VIPs they assist seem grateful. “Occasionally we are fortunate enough to meet and shake their hands,” Patterson says, “as a sign of their appreciation for safely escorting them through our city.”

— Brenna Maloney



Get Behind the Wheel

Hop on a motorcycle and learn about some of the controls at www.kidspost.com.



Uniform: includes riding pants for comfort and a protective Kevlar vest under his shirt.

Officer Patterson’s badge number is S-562. The “S” stands for “sergeant.”

An officer’s gear — service weapon, ammunition, pepper spray, asp (baton), flashlight and handcuffs — weigh a combined 20 pounds.

High boots keep the heat from the motorcycle off an officer’s legs. “Riding a motorcycle is actually like riding a furnace!” Patterson says. Officers are responsible for shining their boots and cleaning their motorcycles. “I can’t just take it to a carwash and run it through. It gets done by hand.”

“We call our motorcycles ‘Motors,’” Patterson says. “I’m Motor 3. My lieutenant is Motor 1. My motor number is based on my rank and seniority.” A lower number means a higher rank and longer time in the unit.



PHOTO AT LEFT COURTESY TODD PATTERSON; PARADE PHOTO BY MARVIN JOSEPH — THE WASHINGTON POST; TOP PHOTOS BY BILL WEBSTER — THE WASHINGTON POST

Left: Todd Patterson performs the “Little General,” a low-speed turn, during a competition to test his skills. Officers routinely sharpen their riding skills in department-sponsored competitions. Above: The Presidential Motor Unit leads the inaugural parade on Pennsylvania Avenue for George W. Bush in January 2005.

CAREER TIPS

Want to be a motorcycle officer? Before you hop on a Harley, here are some things you can do to prepare.

Stay in Shape

Being a police officer is physically demanding. You need to be healthy and in good shape.

Get Good Grades

Many officers study criminal justice in college. Some go on to get advanced degrees.

Do Your Chores

“Take out the trash for your dad.” Patterson says this is important. It shows you respect the people in charge.

Get to Know a Police Officer

If you have questions about what it’s like to be an officer, visit your local police station and make a new friend.

Meet the Minimum Requirements

To be on the District police force, you must be at least 21 and a U.S. citizen. You also must have a driver’s license and have at least 60 hours of college credit.

By the Numbers

40

Number of motorcycle officers in the Presidential Motor Unit.

75

Approximate number of motorcycle officers in the Metropolitan Police Department.

120

Number of hours of special training required to be a D.C. motorcycle officer.

\$61,500

Typical salary for a police sergeant.

SOURCES: Bureau of Labor Statistics; Metropolitan Police Department, Special Events Branch