



AUGUST 2015  
Vol 1, No. 8

Smithfield, RI  
Weather



Thurs

High 79° |



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# Riding the thin blue line

On patrol with the Smithfield Police Department

By Ron Scopelliti

We see the cruisers every day, sitting next to Citizens Bank or at the Hess Station, patrolling on Rte. 7 and Putnam Pike, parked outside the police station... Usually the sight causes us to look at the speedometer, slow the car down to the limit, and hope we don't see any flashing lights in the mirror. What's going on inside the police cruiser, however, is a thousand times more complicated, as officers pursue the dual goal of enforcing the law, and keeping themselves alive.

To offer the public an insight into what goes on during a police patrol, Smithfield Police Chief Richard St. Sauveur allowed me to ride along on patrol with Officer Jon Ricciarelli.

Officer Ricciarelli is one of 41 sworn officers at the department, which also has 19 civilian employees. He volunteered for the assignment, taking me along on two four-hour patrols on consecutive evenings.

Each evening started out in the station at roll call, where officers had a chance



to catch up on what had gone on since they were last on duty, and to learn if there was anything they should pay special attention to during their shifts.

The roll call announcements covered a range of topics, including: BOLO (Be On the Look Out) alerts for vehicles that were involved in crimes in other jurisdictions; new DUI refusal forms; a notification that a private eye would be parked on a local street; a missing dog report on a Shih Tzu from North Smithfield.

It was also during roll call that officers were assigned their beat for the shift. Each side of town has its own beat, and there are also roving beats that leave the officer free to roam throughout the town and ready to back up other officers. Officer Ricciarelli patrolled a roving beat for the two evenings I rode with him.

#### Inside Cruiser 824

Before setting off on patrol there was a quick inspection of the cruiser, a Ford Interceptor sedan. Ricciarelli walked around the car looking for low tires or visible damage. He checked the lights and the siren, and looked through the back seats to make sure nothing had been left behind by past passengers. Officer Jon Ricciarelli checked the “bail out bag” that he personally helped develop. The black satchel includes equipment for tactical operations and extreme first aid instances, in the case of an exceptional event such as an active-shooter incident or a hostage situation.

“We spent a lot of time developing these and making sure they were cost-effective,” Ricciarelli said. “This is something we didn’t have until a couple of years ago.” Now, every officer has one.

Once I took my seat in the front of the cruiser, I was met with something familiar – the Microsoft Windows startup sound. Each patrol vehicle is equipped with a computer that serves a variety of functions – looking up licenses, registrations, criminal records, etc.

Leaning back in the seat I found the headrest to be unusually hard. That’s because the standard headrest had been replaced by a computer printer specifically designed for that location. Among other things, it is used to print out citations. Adjacent to the printer, another unfamiliar interior feature – a shotgun. During the ride-along, the sight of its stock in my peripheral vision was a constant reminder that, while Smithfield is a fairly peaceful town, officers need to be constantly prepared for the worst.

A study by the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund found that 126 law enforcement officers were killed in the line of duty in 2014, up by 24 percent over the previous year. It also notes that 50 of those officers were killed by firearms, up 56 percent from 2013. It states that firearms-related incidents were the top cause of officer deaths in 2014.

Though Smithfield has not lost an officer on duty since the death of Sgt. Norman Vezina, who died trying to rescue a young boy from frigid waters in 1968, the thought of potential danger can never be far from an officer's mind. Attention to detail is a key to safety. Ricciarelli demonstrated some of the steps he takes to insure his safety during a routine traffic stop.

When possible, he parks his car with the right corner of his bumper lined up on the center of the stopped vehicle's bumper, and his front wheels cut to the left. This way, if the cruiser is hit, it won't run directly into the car in front, protecting both himself and the people in the car.

When he steps out of the cruiser, he closes the door quietly, rather than slamming it, and walks up to the stopped car, standing a bit behind the driver. This gives him a clear view of the car's dashboard and floor, and a chance to check for weapons, or other items the driver might not want in plain view. It also puts the driver in an awkward position, where it will be difficult to make any sudden or aggressive moves. Once he's assessed the situation, he can change his position, to see the rest of the interior. It's all carefully thought out to result in a safe and effective traffic stop.

## On Patrol

That attention to detail proved to be a recurring theme. Setting out on patrol, I was immediately struck by the amount of thought that goes into what may seem to an observer as an aimless cruise around town. The route was well-considered, taking in some key locations, and cruising back streets that impatient commuters might speed through to beat Putnam Pike traffic, or that criminals might travel under the assumption that they won't be patrolled. Officer Ricciarelli's eyes seemed to be everywhere, and taking note of everything. Keeping the driver's side window down helped him to pick up on any unusual sounds or smells.

"A key part of police work is being able to pick up on little things," he said. Driving past the motel room of a past offender, for instance, he noted that the man was standing outside his open door, next to an unfamiliar car. An

unfamiliar person was clearly visible through the open door. When Ricciarelli turned the car around and drove back by, the door was closed, and nobody was outside. There was no reason to take further action, but he wrote down the car's license plate and description for future reference.

The highlight of the first night was an attempt to pick up a local man on an outstanding warrant. The first stop was the man's suspected residence. Ricciarelli called in backup from Officer David Walsh and Sgt. Orlando Braxton. With the alternate exits covered, Sgt. Braxton knocked on the front door. There was no response, and nobody appeared to be in the house. Two other stops to gather information yielded nothing substantial, and the search was abandoned for the night.

It was a particularly slow evening, but despite Smithfield's quiet, suburban nature, this isn't always the case.

"We're a lot busier than some might think," Ricciarelli said. "There's a lot to do around town." According to last year's annual report, posted on the department's website, the department made 659 arrests and cited 3,732 traffic violations in the 2013-2014 fiscal year.

And despite its seemingly sedate nature, Smithfield has its share of violent crimes. Last year's arrests included 15 aggravated assault arrests and 72 simple assault arrests.

The second night on patrol was slightly busier than the first, and the action started shortly after leaving the station. Sitting at the top of Whipple Hill and waiting to turn onto Rte. 7, a fast-moving compact sedan caught Ricciarelli's eye.

"I'm going to get behind that car," he said. Among the other bits of technology in the cruiser is a moving radar unit that allows officers to pin down a car's speed on the fly. The car had been exceeding the speed limit, and Ricciarelli noted how it immediately slowed down about 15 MPH when he pulled behind it.

He pulled the car over, and noticed suspicious items on the floor, prompting further investigation. He ran the names of the car's occupants and found that all three had criminal backgrounds.

Ricciarelli didn't seem surprised at this. When I asked why, he noted the excessive concern all the occupants exhibited when a police cruiser pulled behind them.

After calling for backup, he and Officer Kerrin D'Agnelli searched the car, but

found nothing out of order. The driver was warned for a moving violation and would be sent a mail citation for not having proof of insurance. A printer jam prevented the citation from being issued on the spot.

Later that evening, a car caught Ricciarelli's attention because of a missing front license plate. During the stop, it was discovered that nobody in the car had a valid driver's license. The responding officers gave the driver the option of calling a friend to drive the car home, rather than incurring the expense and inconvenience of having it towed.

As the occupants of the car were waiting for their ride, an emergency medical call came in. Walkers at the Stillwater Scenic Trail had noticed a man passed out in a minivan. We were close to the trail, and other officers had the current situation in hand, so we set off at high speed.

Ricciarelli hit the lights and siren, giving further warning with his horn as we sped up Pleasant View Ave. Apart from a rather sluggish response from one small SUV, most drivers were quick to pull off to the side and let us by.

We were first on the scene, as concerned walkers hovered around the van, and tended to the man's dog. Ricciarelli revived the man just before Fire Department personnel arrived and walked him over to their rescue vehicle. He and other officers searched the inside of the van for identification and for items that might indicate the cause of his condition.

We left the scene to perform one last task before returning to the station – transporting a prisoner from North Providence Police headquarters to Smithfield. The female prisoner was released on bail for a crime in North Providence, but had an active warrant in Smithfield for a false Vicodin prescription.

Upon arriving at the Smithfield station, the prisoner was searched, fingerprinted, and led through the booking process. Apparently a familiar face in the station, she was met with friendly greetings, and concern over a substance abuse problem she seemed to be trying to address.

This type of courtesy was typical during my two evenings on patrol. The exchanges, even when people were being questioned or searched, were generally very civil. The one time that someone responded with disrespect during a stop, a stern look and a brief admonition from Ricciarelli were the only actions needed to calm the situation down.

Though cynics might point to the presence of a reporter with a notebook as an influence on the officers' behavior, their actions never struck me as artificial or

forced. It genuinely seemed like business as usual.

Throughout the two patrols, Ricciarelli stressed the need to maintain a strong connection with the community.

"We need to interact with people," he said. "We need to get them comfortable with us." This applied not only to people he was required by immediate circumstances to interact with, but with people he chose to interact with.

On the first night, for example, we stopped in to chat with the manager of a local motel that has been the site of criminal activity in the past, to make sure there were no problems that needed to be addressed. The next night, spotting a family fishing at Stump Pond, Ricciarelli took the opportunity to say hello.

While the two children present initially seemed puzzled and somewhat intimidated at his approach, they loosened up when he asked them how the fishing was.

"You get out of the car and you talk to the kids in the neighborhood. You talk to the people at the Pick and Pay. It's important for us to reach out to people," he said, adding that he feels that officers need to show the public that they have "an investment in the community."

"It needs to happen," he said. "That's the evolution of this job, I think."

Asked in a pre-ride interview about how the department ensures a civil relationship with the citizens of the town, Chief St. Sauveur pointed in particular to the department's hiring practices.

"Our selection process is a grueling one, where we err on the side of caution," he said.

"Our police officers here are very well educated," he noted, adding that with education comes an understanding of different cultures and points of view.

"We don't see a lot of bad decisions here," he said. "If you're here, you're here because you're the cream of the crop."

Published August 2015, front page story

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