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Training, command involvement helping to make U.S. Army Europe motorcycle riders safer

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HEIDELBERG, Germany -- "I'd probably be in pretty bad shape right now," said Sgt. Daniel Zatorski of U.S. Army Europe's 515th Transportation Company, 21st Theater Sustainment Command, of a close call on his motorcycle.



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Robert Myrick, safety manager for the 18th Military Police Brigade and Motorcycle Safety Foundation instructor, discusses safe riding techniques with students in an Experienced Rider Course in Heidelberg, Germany, July 29.

to teach veteran motorcyclists additional techniques and skills that make them better riders -- and safer ones.

The MSF courses have proved to be a great success, with a proven record of helping to keep USAREUR's bikers safe.

"In 2005 USAREUR didn't have a very good safety record when it came to motorcycle accidents," said Robert Myrick, safety manager for the 18th Military Police Brigade and an MSF instructor. That changed drastically when the MSF program started getting greater emphasis the

"I had a vehicle pulling a trailer cut in front of me on a busy road and he just didn't see me," said Zatorski. "I don't know how he didn't see, me but I had to apply the emergency techniques I've learned out here to avoid hitting that vehicle and keep myself upright," he said.

By 'out here' Zatorski meant the Heidelberg Army Airfield, where he was taking part in the Experienced Rider Course, July 29.

The course, one of several offered to Soldiers across USAREUR by the Motorcycle Safety Foundation, is designed

following year, he added. Before long the number of classes was increased during the summer months, and soon USAREUR's motorcycle accident statistics began to tell a different story.

"I would say that we basically went from six to seven fatalities a year ... to the last two years, where USAREUR has been at zero for fatalities," said Myrick. "That is definitely success, and it shows that our program is working."

A variety of MSF courses gives riders with different levels of experience a chance to learn the skills that help them avoid accidents, better handle emergency situations, and become all-around better riders.

"We're learning emergency stopping drills, how to handle the bike, what pre-checks you should do to your motorcycle before taking off, what to look out for during your inspections, and general knowledge on alcohol and riding and how they do not mix at all," Zatorski said.

The ERC and its beginner-level counterpart, the Basic Rider Course, are required classes for any Soldier or civilian employee who wants a USAREUR motorcycle license. But these are not your boring, "death by PowerPoint" briefings. After an hour or two in the classroom riders are on their bikes for the rest of the day.

But even when students are riding, it isn't all play and no work.

"Normally, when riders first arrive in the morning time of the course, they're a little bit apprehensive, a little unsure of what's going to happen," said Myrick. "By the time it's the mid-point of the day, they realize that the course is a bit more challenging than what they expected."

"By the end of the course it's a great feeling to see all the riders come up and basically shake your hand and tell you that they've learned something today. That's something that you can't put a price tag on, because you know once that rider leaves he or she will definitely ride a lot safer than when they came in that morning," he said.

"These courses definitely pay for themselves over and over again," said Zatorski. "You run into situations every day when you're out there on the road that these courses, these techniques that you learn out here, come in handy."

Training courses alone, however, don't get all the credit for USAREUR's motorcycle safety record. Other safety measures such as routine rider risk assessments and motorcycle inspections have been the result of the combined efforts of safety managers such as Myrick and the support and involvement of commanders throughout USAREUR.



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A rider navigates the course at an experienced motorcycle rider training in Heidelberg, Germany, July 29. Courses offered by the Motorcycle Safety Foundation are credited with helping to improve the safety record of motorcyclists in U.S. Army Europe.

“Commanders often require their Soldiers to attend our courses more often than the every three years required in Germany or every two years required in Italy,” said Patricia Jackson, safety specialist for the Installation Management Command-Europe. “More and more often, regardless of when the Soldier last had the course, we are seeing commanders require Soldiers to take our training upon redeployment,” she added.

Commanders also use rider risk assessment to give them an idea of each individual riders risk level. An assessment sheet provided by safety officials helps commanders look at everything from the biker’s age and rank, the type of motorcycle he rides, the type of safety equipment he uses, to more human factors such as whether the rider has had discipline issues or returned recently from a combat deployment.

“I encourage every commander to use those risk assessments to make sure that your riders are riding safe and take the initiative to check your riders out and make sure that that’s exactly what’s happening,” said Myrick. “And if that’s not what’s happening, then you may need to pull that rider’s license for a few days or so to get them back into the safety ‘mind-frame.’ And if that doesn’t happen, then I would recommend (taking the license) for 30 days, and if it still doesn’t happen, then pull it for the rest of the riding season. Because that basically sends a message to the rest of the riders in the organization that the command is definitely serious about motorcycle safety.”

And USAREUR’s positive motorcycle safety record doesn’t mean that commanders or safety experts are easing up on their safety requirements. In fact, they are continuing to expand the amount of training made available to bikers.

“Around the September time frame we hope to kick off the Military Sport Bike Rider Course,” said Myrick. Sport bikes, a variety of motorcycle focused on performance and maneuverability that he said more than 50 percent of USAREUR bikers ride, require unique skills and safety considerations.

“The Military Sport Bike Rider Course is designed specifically for the sport bike rider. We actually go in and we teach them pretty much three-and-a-half hours of theory and another four-and-a-half hours of actual riding,” said Myrick. “The speeds are stepped up, the techniques are stepped up, so once you come to this course you can expect that it will be a lot more advanced than your normal ERC,” he said.

Zatorski is sold on the value of the training, calling it “the best training I’ve had in a while outside of military training.” He encouraged his fellow riders to take it, and take it to heart.

“Stay safe out there. Don’t become a statistic.”

For more information on MSF and other driving safety courses visit www.imcom-europe.army.mil/sites/management/so_atstp.asp.



www.hqusareur.army.mil