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The attached article was published in the August 2007 edition of Motorcycle Sport & Leisure Magazine. It is part of the magazine's regular "A Day In The Life" feature and describes the work done by our volunteers.

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Freewheelers EVS would like to thank Adam and the staff at Motorcycle Sport & Leisure for producing such an excellent article.

FREEWHEELER

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BLOOD BROTHERS

How does working all day, then getting home to being on call all night sound? Oh, you also have to ride a motorcycle in all weathers, rattle a tin at weekends, all to save people's lives...

Imagine the unimaginable, the unpalatable, but the ever possible. You've been out on your bike, sideswiped by a car, and wound up in a hospital bed. You need an operation that may require specialist x-rays or scans, or maybe a pint or two of blood. Perhaps the surgeon's saw will need a nice new sharp blade. We all know by now the pressure the NHS is under, and don't think that they'll send an ambulance just for your titanium leg screws, so who's going to bring this stuff to help you if it's needed by the medical staff, and needed quickly, at times urgently, and out of normal hours?

The angels with dirty faces that serve a huge area of Somerset, north Somerset, Bristol, Bath and west Wiltshire are the Freewheelers Emergency Voluntary Service, and it's they who are called upon and relied upon, by NHS medical staff, to collect and deliver these vital supplies.

One of several groups around the country, these people save the NHS money and more importantly save other people's lives, by getting out on a motorbike between 7pm and 7am, 365 days of the year, in all weathers (fancy Exmoor in winter?), because they love to ride bikes, and because they want to help their fellow human beings. On top of that, they have to also fundraise and finance the whole operation, which costs around £20,000 a year. It's a quite astonishing gift to us the general public, with nothing expected in return. Rare in a society where time usually costs money.

WORDS/PICS:
ADAM BOLTON

If you get stuck behind this on a rolling road block on the M5, you know you're following something pretty precious.

"In fact I seem to do more drugs than anybody else!"

Blue lights, sirens and a matrix system warn other road users that something urgent is on its way through, and its only really when the rider passes that it becomes clear it's a blood courier.

BLOOD

Freewheelers is a registered charity, and began 15 years ago when a serving RAF man had that unexpected motorcycle accident, and ended up in Weston Hospital. His care was so good that he determined on his recovery to put something back in, so he bought a CX500, rounded up some mates, and began the free courier service that has now evolved to 65 members, and four operational bikes.

The four Freewheeler bikes are all police-spec Honda Pan European ST1300s, and

their uprated electrics allow the use of matrix systems, blue lights and sirens. 'URGENT BLOOD' is most useful for alerting drivers behind, although it must be tempting to occasionally flag up the message 'PUT YOUR PHONE DOWN', presumably left on the system from police days. The fluorescent markings give the bikes the visibility required, and it's clear that most drivers must assume that the riders are bike cops coming up behind them, aiding in the bikes' quick passage. Only 'BLOOD' written back to front in their rear view mirror would give them any inkling of what the bikes' true purpose is.

The cynical among us might think that these worthy volunteers do it just to getting a thrill at playing at bike coppers. Chairman John Graves (retired, rides a Suzuki VR1500 with loud pipes and a trailer), riding assessor Allan Roberts (retired after 23 years as a police officer, seven years on bikes, rides a BMW KRS) and vice-chair Nick Anderson (works in IT, rides a VFR750 and a CBR 400) make it very clear that the people who come on board have to be of a certain calibre, and that begins with being an already qualified advanced motorcyclist.

"If already qualified, we'll give them an assessment ride to see their suitability," explains Allan. If not, an interested rider will be pointed to the IAM, Rospa or BMF to get the qualification. "We ride marked bikes, and we are permitted to use 'Blue Light Run Criteria', meaning that there is a risk to life, hence the use of blues and twos on our emergency 'shouts'," continues Allan. "We have extremely tight standards and procedures that must be respected, as must the charity and its public perception, and up until now we have found the right people."

HOW URGENT?

Volunteering in the UK doesn't always mean making cakes for the local village fete, so what the Freewheelers do could almost be termed 'extreme volunteering'. Another rider runs me through what a typical period on call might be like, and it sounds like bloody hard work, let alone the inherent risks in riding a bike. Mark Douglas is a project manager for the Scottish Ambulance Service, so already contends with a more-than-average punishing working week filled with flights to Scotland and back.

"We're on call from 7pm to 7am, the out of hours period when everything else is closed. We'll be 'on duty' a week at a time, on a rota basis, and we have a coordinator who will receive the calls from the hospitals and clinics, and then delegate the jobs to us riders. Some days, I'll get in from work at 6.50pm having just flown in



from Scotland, the wife hands me a pint of orange juice and lemonade that I'll stick down my neck, then I'm out of the door again by 7pm on an emergency call. This could go on for a week, but it'd be rare. Friday and Saturday evenings are always busier, as is the Bristol bike, as there are three main hospitals in the area. Though it has to be said that it can be worse if you get no calls at all. Calls can come at any time, though it's rare after midnight."

What different jobs do you get asked to do?

"The category of job is either non-urgent, meaning that it needs to be there by 7am the next morning, urgent, to be delivered by a specific time, or emergency, which is a delivery that involves risk to a patient's life."





Do emergency calls allow you to do as police motorcyclists do?

"No. We cannot speed or break the traffic laws. However, we do have special dispensations that allow us to treat a red traffic light as a give way situation, we can go left or right at a traffic bollard, and we are permitted to use the hard shoulder on a motorway. Obviously, the blue lights help us get through traffic very easily."

It's quite a responsibility. "Yes, it can be, though any rider can refuse to take a job at any time. We all get tired like anyone else, and there are times when it's best not to risk extreme winter weather on a bike. We're volunteers after all."

What kind of things do you carry, and what do you keep on the bike?



"Each bike has a box containing the essentials for the bike; a tread gauge, tyre pressure gauge, and a fuel card for filling up. We use purpose-made, screw top UN3373 regulation compliant (for the transport of category B biological substances) plastic containers that have an absorbent pad in the bottom, just in case of spillage. We also have a large rack in case we need to carry larger boxes. We carry blood, human tissue, samples for analysis or pathology, x-rays, scans, CD-ROMs, patients' records, and drugs. In fact I seem to do more drugs than anybody else. One rider once transported a false leg tucked into his jacket up the motorway. We were asked to carry a wheelchair, and we gently explained we couldn't do it. We're also asked to carry flowers, pillowcases or patients' possessions, but we don't do it, apart from the fact we'd be taking up a bike that may be needed for an emergency somewhere else."

How urgent are the emergency calls?

"We once replied to a call from a hospital asking us to pick up some scans, and we enquired how urgent? "Well, let's put it this way," came the reply, "we've got him on the operating table with his head open, and we want to know what to do next." So that was definitely urgent! Another time, one of our riders David had to sprint through hospital corridor after corridor, guided by doctors and nurses, so urgent was the x-ray that he was carrying."



The Freewheeler, fresh from a 12 hour shift and still smiling. Just.

Left: The high visibility of the Freewheelers marked bikes mean that they can get through traffic easily.

Below: Even the benign Pan European can be made to look purposeful and this is the way to do it - the dumbest, least switched-on driver out there couldn't fail to notice this coming up quickly in the rear view mirror.

RIDING FOR LIFE

Tell me a bit about the bikes. "They are usually bought as ex-demo bikes from Honda UK or Sonic, and normally have between 6000 to 12,000 miles on the clock. Our newest, a black Deauville, was bought by the Regency Charity Trust, and will be used at shows and as a training bike, as well as a spare operational machine. We like to run Bridgestone BT20s on the Pans, and servicing is carried out by local dealers like V&J. Each bike covers about 100 miles a month, and is serviced every 4000 miles, major at 16,000 miles. We get a great insurance deal from Motorcycle Direct, and that includes recovery too, but the bikes are so reliable anyway."

You must all have understanding wives and employers?

"Yes," replies Martin Lovell, another Freewheeler (heating engineer, just bought a Triumph Daytona), "it can be a demanding week, but my wife and family know that it is important to me and allow for that. I changed jobs six weeks ago, and made it clear to my new company that it was something that I did, and they were fine about it. In my case, joining Freewheelers has actually forced me to get out and ride, sometimes 1200 miles a week, compared to the few hundred miles a year I did before, and make me a better and more experienced rider."

"How urgent? "Well, let's put it this way," came the reply, "we've got him on the operating table with his head open, and we want to know what to do next."

ALL ABOUT THE NUMBERS:

Stats and facts taken from Nick Anderson's blog as coordinator for an average week.

- £15,000 to run the charity for a year (which usually includes replacing one of our four bikes)
- We save the NHS between £60,000 and £80,000 in taxi fares.
- We also average one to two emergency runs a week
- We reckon that for the NHS to staff a similar service professionally would cost them around £300,000 a year, but that would never happen, so we save them £80,000 a year and throw in helping to save a few lives for free.

Excluding the Saturday morning calls that my colleague covered:

- Call total for the week: 12 non-urgent, 15 urgent, 3 emergency, 3 declined, 1 cancelled.
- Rider hours – 49.25 this week.
- NHS money saved in taxi fares: £972
- Trips that helped save a life: 3 – 'priceless'



By day a Freewheeler might install a new central heating system in your house, work in IT, or be a retired person pottering in the garden. At night they'll ride like the devil to help out their fellow humans beings and because they just love riding.



"I'll get back from work at 6.50pm having just flown in from Scotland, the wife hands me a pint of orange juice and lemonade that I'll stick down my neck, then I'm out of the door again by 7pm on an emergency call."

The backbone to the Freewheelers vital service is their fundraising and clever use of the resources available. Apparently coordinator and fundraiser Alison Mayer, who actually works as an information manager in the NHS, and chairman John, are experts at getting good deals, discounts and using every trick in the book to rake in funds for the charity.

Much tin rattling at motorcycle shows and other events is essential, and expected of every Freewheeler member at some point. The brightly liveried bikes speak for themselves at these events and help to draw a crowd, and who could turn down a couple of quid for such a worthy cause? The excellent and informative website, maintained by rider Mike Belch, is also essential to the Freewheeler cause and is a focal point for information on what they do.

"Most people don't even know we are a charity," says John, "and are often shocked

Above left: None of us want to end up in A&E, but the fact is those served by the Freewheelers are at a distinct advantage.

Left: Government approved, stamped and tested UN3373 Tuppaware box means that the material gets to its destination in one piece.

when we tell them we do it all for free, and pay for it ourselves! We never know what happens to the patients for whom we collect and deliver these medical supplies, so it's impossible to have any feedback on how well we are doing. The hospitals use us as a service so we get more praise from the general public than the medical staff, but that's understandable."

A love of riding motorcycles is principally what binds these people together, yet while we may ride for the thrill or experience, the Freewheelers mission statement is printed clearly on the shirts and jackets that they wear – 'RIDING FOR LIFE'. While we all selfishly hope that it won't be our life they'll be riding for, they should be supported, congratulated and thanked by us all. And if you've got a few quid spare to buy a couple of motorbikes for the Freewheelers, contact them through their excellent website (www.freewheelers.org.uk).