

10 deadly errors cops make on the roadways

An often invisible enemy awaits to take the lives of America's Finest

Roadway deaths have been the leading on-duty killer to law enforcement for more than a decade so it is time we add a new list of 10 errors in the minds of today's warriors

In 1973 and 1974, we lost an unbelievable 548 officers in the line of duty — 278 of those succumbed to felonious gunfire. It was this context and the fact that 51 of those line of duty deaths occurred in California that led to a groundbreaking book by Los Angeles Police Detective Pierce R. Brooks in 1975.

The book, [Officer Down Code 3](#), was written by Brooks through a deep belief that many of the line of duty deaths could be prevented.

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The unfortunate fact remains that many of our heroes in uniform are dying because of their actions behind the wheel.

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In 1975, Calibre Press did not exist — Charles Remsberg had not yet written his famous Street Survival textbooks, and the concept of Officer Survival Training was non-existent so to say that Pierce Brooks was before his time is an understatement.

Applying Brooks' Method Today

Well, 37 years later, it's doubtful you will find a copy of Officer Down Code 3 at your agency, but every cop out there has seen and heard the remnants of Brooks' work.

Don't get "Tombstone Courage" your FTO told you but he heard it from someone else who heard it from another who had read it in Brooks' book. That saying was part of Brooks' famous Identification of the "10 Deadly Errors" that he observed was killing officers and, at the time he wrote them, at a record rate.

Whether it was "Failure to Watch Hands" or "Poor Search" or "Improper or No Handcuffing," the errors listed by Brooks found their way in the lingo of every officer and on posters that hang today.

The original work one LAPD Detective (often mentioned by Sergeant Joe Friday — Dragnet — in the opening monologue as the Lieutenant on duty) conducted close to 40 years ago remains valid today and we should continue to follow each and every rule listed but if we stop there, we are making a grave mistake.

It's a different time in our profession than it was in 1975 and while violence continues to plague our profession, an often invisible enemy awaits to take the lives of America's Finest.

Roadway deaths have been the leading on duty killer to law enforcement for more than a decade and in July we were once again reminded at how devastating this enemy is when we lost 11 officers in that month alone to this epidemic.

It is time we add a new list of ten errors in the minds of today's warriors...

1.) Failure to Wear Seatbelt

It's listed first because it is the easiest to correct. Close to half of every officer killed behind the wheel were not wearing a seatbelt. The excuses are many but the tragedy this mistake causes is unspeakable.

2.) Speed Kills

We warn our kids of this danger but it applies to our profession as well. The difference between 80 mph and 100 mph over ten miles is a mere 90 seconds. Excessive speed is a tremendous risk and unfortunately a week rarely goes by where we don't hear of another line of duty death involving an officer at high speeds in a single vehicle crash.

3.) Multitasking

In 1975, you may have seen a hand held radio and a notepad in a police car. Today, the inside looks like a spaceship. We have always required officers to multi-task but they now face an increasing danger as laptops and cameras replace pens and notepads. There is a time and place for it in our profession but any additional duties behind the wheel besides driving should be done with extreme caution.

4.) Tunnel Vision

We have long known the dangers of tunnel vision in deadly force encounters as stress will often cause the loss of peripheral vision but we must be just as concerned behind the wheel. When the lights and siren go on, we often encounter tunnel vision and that combined with driving can be deadly. When you hear your siren, don't trust your peripheral vision but turn your head and look.

5.) Fatigue

Brooks identified this in his list and it must remain here. We may never know to the extent that fatigue plays in roadway tragedy in our profession but evidence suggests that fatigue continues to be a factor in our safety both on the road and off.

6.) Failure to Clear Intersections

The most dangerous time during a shift is proceeding through intersections. The failure to clear each lane, whether in normal driving or emergency response, can be devastating. It's not the intersection that will kill you...it's the side impact collision.

7.) Failure to Wear Reflective Vest

It's mandated on a federally funded highway but should be worn whenever we step foot out of our vehicle and into traffic.

8.) Improper Tire Maintenance

The only piece of vehicle equipment between you and the road is indeed the most important. A tire with cuts, poor tread or that is under or over inflated can be deadly.

9.) Improper Use of Tire Deflation Devices

The tool consists of a string and sharp objects and the training is often conducted with a short video with little or no practical experience. That combined with high speed vehicles contributes to deaths in our profession every year. An officer should never be standing at or near the roadway when deploying but unfortunately the nature of the activity leads all too often with officers placing themselves in harm's way. If you cannot deploy these devices away from the roadway while using cover/concealment (and a police car doesn't count) then they should not be used.

10.) Tombstone Courage

This term was originally made famous by Pierce Brooks but it also applies to roadways. We drive every day and most days nothing out of the ordinary happens behind the wheel. It is only natural to get overconfident behind the wheel which will lead to Tombstone Courage. As Brooks described over three decades ago, this behavior will send you to the grave.

Conclusion

Nothing can take the place of the work of Pierce R. Brooks and every law enforcement officer working today owes a great deal of gratitude to this man. The list above is just a small contribution to an effort by many to reduce line of duty deaths. To be fair, this was not completely my idea.

I have the privilege to be involved in an effort from the State of California called the [SAFE Campaign](#). While at a meeting last year, the work of Brooks came up in discussion and I and others immediately saw value in addressing roadways in a similar fashion. On behalf of that effort, I hope these ten reminders will contribute to your everyday safety practices.