

The Armed Motorcyclist: Equipment, Skills and Tactics for Self-Defense

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Imagine this: You're in the left lane of the 2-lane entrance to a highway access road. To your left there's a 4-foot shoulder, then a wall. The access road curves to the left, then to the right in what would be a high-speed S-turn if this were a racetrack. There's a nondescript blue sedan slightly ahead of you in the right lane; you're about even with its left rear fender. The sedan drifts left, slightly into your lane. You slow and move left. He moves further left. Almost onto the shoulder and thinking the driver must be distracted, you beep your horn. The driver looks directly at you and swerves into your lane. His only possible intention is to put you into the wall; there's nobody immediately ahead of him, and no obstacle. You brake hard, dodge onto the shoulder and pull in behind, intending to let him go ahead. He slows, intending for you to pass. You slow, he slows again, and this little dance continues until you're both going less than 25 on the access road, where the average speed is about 65. The nearest exit is about 2 miles ahead, and the access road joins one of the busiest highways in town shortly after that. Cars are passing and you're worried you might be rear-ended. What now?

Some years ago, I decided that I needed to be armed. Being a rider was part of that decision. I've since had self-defense training from several excellent instructors, become an enthusiastic (if not very expert) IDPA competitor, and a participant in the National Tactical Invitational, among other things. As good and as varied as my instruction has been, none of it applied directly to motorcycling. I had to make things up as I went along, based on 40+ years of riding experience. That includes commuting, touring, roadracing, enduro competition, and riding everywhere from Florida swamps to Chicago rush hours. I'm not an around-the world adventurer or a champion racer, but I've learned a few things along the way. What follows is an effort to share that with others. The reader should take everything here as tentative, as ideas to evaluate rather than as received wisdom. Ideally, they should be systematically tested, but until they are, informed judgment will have to do.

The rider's situation.

If you're reading this you've already made the decision to arm yourself. There are a few self-defense issues specific to motorcyclists that deserve mention, though. The first is the rider's relative vulnerability. Unlike drivers, riders are completely exposed. We have none of the security that comes from being belted into a steel cage which itself can be used as a weapon. On streets, highways, forest trails or dirt roads, the rider is exposed to hazards of all sorts, including two- and four-legged predators. The rider, in short, has most of the disadvantages of both the driver and the pedestrian. Riders do have advantages in speed and maneuverability, of course, but only if we are skilled enough to use them.

Riders also have other disadvantages. Cars offer many places to store a handgun and other defensive tools (e.g. flashlights, knives, batons, pepper spray). Drivers without carry permits may be able to keep handguns in glove compartments or consoles, or long guns in the trunk or truck cab. Riders do not have these options, and so face both practical and legal restrictions on the availability of weapons. Since I am not an attorney, and since laws vary so much by state and municipality, I won't attempt to cover the latter here. My advice is to do some research (for example, at www.packing.org) and possibly consult a competent attorney in your home state and anywhere you plan to travel.

The concealed carry dilemma.

A handgun, to be useful, must be instantly accessible. Threats develop quickly and at close range; a handgun that's difficult to retrieve is more a liability than an asset. So much is conventional wisdom. The problem comes from the fact that, when the handgun is not needed, it must be kept safely concealed.

There is always a tradeoff between concealment and accessibility. For motorcyclists, the problem is worse because the clothes we wear for safety inevitably compromise accessibility and, in some cases, concealment. Think of the sport rider in a one- or two-piece leather suit. These fit tightly for a reason—to minimize wind drag and flapping at high speed. Where does the gun go? Even if the suit is custom-fit for a holster, when the rider stops for gas or lunch, what conceals the gun when the jacket is off? How do you access the gun quickly when wearing gloves, given that it's behind at least one zipper?

Suppose, instead, that the rider wears a touring suit. These are cut looser and have many external pockets, but the problems of concealment and access remain. Pocket carry has its own problems, including "printing" of the gun and its accessibility behind a zippered flap.

Wearing jeans and a jacket doesn't answer the question, either. Even if you ignore the risk of injury or wear more protective Kevlar jeans, the jacket is still zipped and, on a warm summer day, the rider is going to want to take it off at stops and destinations.

Safety and security are problems, too. However one carries, the trigger must be protected and the gun held securely. Most holsters do this reasonably well under normal circumstances, but how well do they function when the wearer is sliding down the road at, say, 70 or 80 miles per hour? These things happen to even the best riders, and the last thing that's needed right then is a loose gun. In addition, a gun that's holstered close to the body can create impact injuries in a crash even if it stays secure and there's no unintended discharge.

There's another safety and comfort issue. The point of riding is to enjoy the ride, whatever that means to you. If a handgun puts weight on your shoulders or neck, digs into your side, back, or belly, or otherwise creates discomfort or fatigue, either the ride will be cut short or the gun eventually left at home. If carrying the gun creates a distraction or reduces alertness, the chance of a crash increases. Since you're more likely to be hurt by hard contact with the pavement, a car, or some roadside obstacle than by violence, it makes no sense to protect yourself against the latter by increasing the chance of the former.

Solving the dilemma: How and what to carry.

I'm aware of four different ways to address the problems listed above. The first three I use personally; a friend suggested the last. Each method has its own advantages and limitations. They're offered here only as suggestions, and as with any suggestions the responsibility for their safe and effective implementation is entirely yours. Experiment with dummy guns and practice with them before carrying in public.

Off-body carry: Tank bag.

When pistols were relatively huge and cumbersome, cavalymen and travelers let their horses bear the weight by using pommel holsters. Motorcyclists can do the same by using a tank bag. Not any tank bag will do, though. It should have a separate, easily accessible compartment used only for a handgun; a layer of foam that cushions the gun and protects the tank from dents; easy access from the saddle or from either side of the bike; be small enough to carry easily and unobtrusively; and detach quickly in case you need to "grab and go." (I prefer magnetic bags for that reason, but because so many bikes have plastic tanks, this won't work for everyone.) Finally, you should build, buy, or have made a holster that securely retains the gun in its compartment. My choice is a small expandable Chase Harper magnetic bag, used on my R100GS BMW and my vintage CB750 Honda. The Kydex holster, retained by a nylon strap, keeps my Glock 30

safely in place and accessible to either hand. A spare magazine stays in a Kydex pouch next to it. When carried, the tank bag is not too clumsy and looks perfectly innocent. I've even made a shoulder strap for added convenience. While not as accessible as a belt holster, this arrangement is at least equivalent to a concealed-carry briefcase or purse.

Fanny pack.

Once very popular, concealed-carry fanny packs are now often seen as red flags to potential assailants. I'm not too sure about this conventional wisdom. Think of the art of camouflage: the secret lies not in becoming invisible but in *looking like something innocent and ordinary*. For a motorcyclist, a fanny pack makes a lot of sense: it gives you a place to carry a wallet, sunglasses, keys, and other things, especially if you wear sport-riding leathers. With the addition of an embroidered product or motorcycle logo patch, it's a perfectly natural part of one's gear.

Here, however, compromise is inevitable. The fanny pack creates some of the same dangers as a belt holster in the event of a crash—you don't want to fall on it. A pack that includes padding will be more comfortable when riding and give some crash protection as well. The photo shows my choice, a "Tommy's GunPack." Instead of the usual "quickdraw" loop that many packs use, the GunPack has a Fastex buckle that keeps it securely closed, an important feature. Worn on the left side, the gun can be reached with either hand, but stays out of the way when riding. The pack can carry even a relatively large, heavy pistol comfortably, with the weight on the hips. It has one drawback, however: there's no built-in holster. For this reason I would not carry anything but a double-action revolver or DAO automatic in it. It's possible to fit a custom holster to the GunPack, but ambidextrous access would be lost.

Another alternative might be the Wilderness SafePacker, available several sizes. It may be carried in a variety of ways, including as a belt or fanny pack, and has a secure buckle closure with more than adequate retention. I haven't personally used one, but it seems to have a lot of potential utility

Pocket carry.

The stealthiest of all carry techniques is to not have any "container" visible. Pocket carry fits this standard perfectly, but at a cost. Only the smallest, lightest guns will do, and it exposes the rider to possible injury in a crash. Each person has to weigh this inevitable tradeoff for him- or herself.

Pocket carry is especially suited (pardon the pun) for fabric riding suits like the Aerostich Roadcrafter or Darien. Available from a number of manufacturers, they feature handy waterproof zippered and flapped pockets on the chest, thighs, side, and sleeves. I have two guns that I regularly carry in my Darien's chest pockets: a Kel-Tec P-32 in a WellsMade Kydex holster for the left chest pocket, and an S&W 637 in a Rusty Sherrick pocket holster. The latter can go in either the right or left pocket. Why these guns in particular? They're small and light. Chest-pocket carry puts the weight of the guns on the neck and upper back when riding, leading to fatigue and discomfort. The Kel-Tec P-3AT in .380 or one of the new ultra-light Smiths in .357 would be more powerful with no weight penalty, but this runs into another tradeoff: cost. These are primarily backup guns; I know I can shoot them reasonably well because I've practiced and even competed with them (in IDPA "BUG" classes) and don't feel the need to duplicate the break-in and learning curves with new ones, nor to spend the money that otherwise would go to, say, a new helmet.

Why chest-pocket carry? First, accessibility. I've fitted homemade zipper pulls to increase accessibility, potentially with either hand, and the crossdraw position of the guns will work where hip pocket carry won't. Second, safety. In a fall, one is more likely to land on one's side or back. Look at the padding on racing and touring suits; this is where the impact is likely to be. While nothing in life is certain, and there are irreducible risks to chest pocket carry, this seems to me (in the absence of better information) to be a viable choice. Needless to say, a pocket holster should always be used.

Ankle carry.

I know a number of highly skilled and experienced people who use ankle carry for their backup guns. With practice, ankle guns can be accessed quickly, and there are any number of small, lightweight handguns available in effective calibers.

Ankle carry is a viable option if one's bike and clothing permit it. On a sportbike, an ankle holster may interfere with proper foot positioning, so cruisers and touring bikes favor this option. One's pants obviously must be worn outside the boots and the boots themselves should be relatively low or access to the gun will be severely compromised. If the weather turns nasty and a rainsuit is worn, the gun is unavailable. Finally, even under the best of circumstances the rider will have to dismount before drawing.

Ankle carry allows good concealment, and a quality holster gives adequate retention. Positioned inside the leg, the gun is unlikely to create impact injuries in a crash. In fact, the friend who suggested this option was involved in a highway-speed fall when his rear tire blew. Thanks to his riding skills, he and his wife were uninjured, and thanks to a well-designed holster, his pistol stayed in place.

Ankle carry also solves a problem inherent in the other modes: You don't have to constantly carry your stuff (and gun) in your hands. This can be a great convenience.

Other equipment.

Self-defense instructors correctly advise against that depending on a handgun alone. What else do you need and how do you carry it?

First of all, a knife. Knives are both weapons and general-purpose tools. Most students of the handgun carry at least one, usually a locking folder with a pocket clip. Good sturdy examples are available in a wide price range. I'd advise carrying a utility blade rather than a specialized combat knife, and one that's not so expensive that its loss would be a hardship.

Pocket knives have drawbacks besides potential loss. Hip or side pocket carry can cause injury in a crash, so using a zippered sleeve pocket or off-body carry is advisable. This precaution reduces emergency access, though.

I choose instead to carry a small boot knife, which offers easy deployment as well as safe and unobtrusive carry. The Randall Triathlete comes with a clip sheath fitting many boots. My other option is a Becker "Necker," used with heavier touring boots. I made a leather cover that surrounds the factory Kydex sheath and holds a plastic clip so the knife is securely retained. Neither is very noticeable, but neither is "concealed," an issue in some states.

Second, a flashlight. Like knives, these are general-purpose tools. I carry two. The first, for ordinary purposes, is a Photon LED with a red bulb on my key ring. The second, a SureFire Executive or G2, usually goes in a jacket pocket, tank bag, or fanny pack. Flashlights can also double as impact weapons very much like a kubotan; a variety of aggressively serrated bezels are available for this purpose. My feeling is that the more peaceful-appearing models are nearly as effective and don't require as much after-the-fact explanation if it becomes necessary to use one.

Finally, pepper spray. While it would be foolish to rely on pepper spray alone to deter a serious assailant, if used quickly and decisively it can create time to escape or to access a weapon. I would carry it in a riding jacket whose pockets are waterproof, or someplace on the bike itself. Even the sprays with "safety" positions, such as Fox OC, can be triggered accidentally just by moving around in a pocket, and a crash can release the entire contents. Having OC soak your clothes makes for a very uncomfortable ride.

Two final points about equipment:

1. Tradeoffs and compromises are inevitable. Each person needs to decide what works well in his or her own life, accept whatever limitations or inconveniences that choice entails, and work around them. There are no perfect tools.
2. Equipment alone guarantees nothing. Without the skill to employ one's tools effectively and the knowledge of how and when to employ them, the best possible tools are useless. These topics are considered next.

Skills

What is the purpose of skill development? Unlike the police officer, the armed citizen's job is to avoid trouble if at all possible. Regardless of any legal requirement to retreat when threatened, it simply makes sense to avoid conflict if possible. Consider the following scenario: You're riding in an urban area, in heavy but not gridlocked traffic. You're in a commercial area, a popular counterculture gathering place also frequented by vagrants and beggars. The sidewalks are usually crowded with shoppers and sightseers. As you ride past a corner, two black men, shoppers, are suddenly attacked by three white vagrants, one of them a woman. They are being viciously beaten by the three, who are screaming racial insults as they kick and punch the victims lying helpless on the ground. A number of bystanders look on uselessly; the police are nowhere around, despite the fact that a "mini-precinct" is close to the scene.

You're wearing a helmet, jacket, gloves, and boots. You have your gun, your knife, pepper spray, cell phone, and flashlight. You know the law, and lethal force is justified in this situation. What do you do?

This attack really happened, not far from my neighborhood. I ride or drive by the location several times each week, and could have witnessed it. I've thought about the actions I might have taken, and have no fully satisfactory answers. Take on three violent and possibly drugged assailants hand-to-hand? Depend on their compliance to my commands at the point of my Glock 30? Risk shooting surrounded by a crowd of onlookers, possibly panicked at the sight of a helmeted and booted figure with a gun? Pepper-spray the attackers (and the victims, and some of the crowd?)

Here's another scenario: You and a companion are riding double down a winding rural two-lane road, going home after a day in the mountains. An old pickup with two young men in it appears behind you, uncomfortably close. They stay behind you even though there's plenty of opportunity to pass. Visions of *Easy Rider* come to mind. Do you slow down so they can pass more easily? Pull over, hop off the bike, and get ready to draw your pistol? Try to outrun them? Turn off at the first crossroad, which is a smaller, less traveled road than the one you're on? This did happen to my wife and me some years ago. It was before I began carrying, so one of the options wasn't available. The bike we were on wasn't fast, but it was sporty, with high-performance suspension and tires, and my racing skills weren't as rusty then as they are now. I outran them. Was there a real threat? I'll never know. Were we in danger, running 100+ on a public road? You bet. Would it have worked if they had presented a real threat in a newer car or truck? Unknown. Would I have done the same if I'd had a pistol? Probably. For me the risks of high-speed riding are still less than the risks of confronting two assailants, possibly armed, in mobile cover that's also a two-ton impact weapon.

The point of these two stories is that, in order to respond effectively to danger, one must have a clear plan of action with a definite goal. The plan must include a realistic assessment of your equipment's capabilities and limitations, your own capabilities and limitations, and the constraints and opportunities of the situation. These are not independent; skill and knowledge provide opportunities unavailable to the unskilled and ignorant. But skill and knowledge are important in another way, too: The more you know, the greater the chance of avoiding trouble in the first place, whether it's a breakdown on the road, a dirt bike sunk in a swamp, or a convenience-store robbery in progress.

Riding Skills.

First, learn to ride *slowly*. Real skill at low speeds is more rare and valuable than most believe. One is most likely to encounter trouble where there are many people. That means cities, and cities mean traffic, curbs, utility poles, and other obstacles that render all the performance of a sportbike useless. What will you do when a road-raging psychotic or an opportunistic thief finds you on a gridlocked freeway or urban street?

Low speed riding is where police motorcyclists excel, because this is where they do most of their work. Their training stresses techniques not taught, to my knowledge, anywhere else. These include maneuvering through closely spaced obstacles with smoothness and grace, all the more remarkable because they're often on police-model Road Kings not known for agility. Their techniques require heavy use of the clutch, throttle, and rear brake to regulate momentum, methods just the opposite of those used in high-speed riding. While I know of no schools that teach these, there is an excellent video, *Ride Like a Pro III*, recommended to me by a motorcycle officer.

I should mention two cautions about the techniques in this video. First, their demonstrations employ touring bikes or cruisers. If you ride something different, from a chopper to an adventure tourer to a sportbike, approach the exercises very cautiously. These techniques were developed for police bikes, and yours may respond differently enough to put you on the ground.

Second, many sportbikes have very small rear brakes, and some clutches won't tolerate much slipping. These aren't design flaws, simply reflections of their intended use. Much practice dragging the rear brake and slipping the clutch will cause faster than normal wear.

Another way to learn precision low-speed riding is to take an off-road course. These are often available through the Motorcycle Safety Foundation and local dirt riding groups. Learning the basics of cornering, acceleration, and braking on loose surfaces, uphill and down, while maneuvering over and around rocks, tree trunks, ledges, and through streams, will make you a better rider under all circumstances.

Simultaneously, learn to ride *safely*. This isn't just operational skill, but includes situation awareness, lane positioning, maintaining alertness, and so forth. The Motorcycle Safety Foundation's advanced course is an excellent place to start. There's also a British publication, *The Police Rider's Handbook to Better Motorcycling*, available on the Riderwarehouse website. It's a little preachy, and the diagrams illustrate their points from the "wrong" side of the road, but it, too, comes highly recommended. Safe riding skills may seem irrelevant if you're running from danger, or running toward it in order to save another, but think: In either case, is pitching your bike and body down the road, or flattening both against a truck, going to help?

Next, learn to ride *fast*. This is last deliberately, because I believe the skills involved are the least likely to be used in self-defense. Nevertheless, more skill is preferable to less, high-speed skills are a great self-confidence builder, and high-performance riding is a world of fun. There are a number of good high-performance schools; I'd recommend starting with one that emphasizes road riding rather than racetrack techniques, as these are more broadly useful. For competition or track-day recreation, a race-oriented school is optimal, but that's not our topic. Think of it this way: If you were going to fight for your life or that of a loved one, which would you rather have—CQB or IPSC training?

Defensive skills.

While you're learning to ride, learn to fight. Note that I didn't say learn to shoot. Shooting is part of fighting, but not all by any means. One of the drawbacks to having a gun is that it may become your first option in case of trouble. But trouble comes quickly and at close range. There may not be time to get a gun. Also, lethal force may not be warranted by the situation. By all means, learn the skills necessary to gunfight, and to gunfight well, but learn other skills at the same time.

Most advanced defensive handgun classes include weapon retention, recovery, creating distance and similar vital skills. Learn more. If your favorite instructors don't cover these things, they can probably recommend someone who does. Get instruction that integrates weapons with empty-hand combative techniques (for example, the Suarez International close range classes and SouthNarc extreme close quarters training) rather than tutoring in a single art. The world presents challenges beyond any one set of techniques. It also helps to learn integrated methods rather than separate skill sets. Using techniques in combination is also a critical skill, and one that needs practice.

Both avoiding and winning conflicts requires awareness. Even a few seconds' warning may be enough to let one evade or prepare for an attack, or to strike first. "Situation awareness" is a skill like any other, and also requires practice. Experienced riders have already developed at least some situation awareness, though they may call it "traffic sense." Their habits of scanning the road for hazards and careless or aggressive drivers are well established, and they can respond to potential trouble even before they're fully aware of it. This takes dedicated attention to riding; distractions such as cell phones, music, etc. should be avoided.

Decades of research show that consistent practice enables people to detect specific kinds of objects automatically—they "pop out" of the background without effort or intention, even while the person is occupied by another task. Research also shows that when one's attention is focused, one can be "blind" to even significant (but unexpected) events in plain sight. We notice what we expect to see, what we're trained to see, what's relevant to our current task or motive, and what's strong, close, loud, or bright enough to get through all those other filters.

To improve situation awareness we need to develop both knowledge and motivation. The first comes from experience and instruction. What does a threat look like? What postures do potential attackers adopt? Advanced self-defense classes such as Firearms Research and Instruction's Level III and IV use force-on-force scenarios to begin this education. The rest is up to the individual. When road rage incidents are reported in the newspaper, read for detail. Learn how the situation developed, who was involved, where it happened. Do the same with incidents of violent crime at places such as gas stations, convenience stores, and fast-food outlets. Look online for stories, and for more details than are covered in the press. Visualize the scene and an effective response. Your goal is both organized knowledge and mental rehearsal of the cues that should draw your attention. You'll need to teach yourself to attend to a range of events and have useful responses ready. Use every ride (and every walk) as an occasion to practice your observational skills. Make it a game.

Motivation is also important to awareness. Your goal is to stay safe and enjoy the ride. Assuming danger lurks everywhere creates stress and reduces your enjoyment. Such a motive may also prompt "false positives," the perception of threat where there is none. That's as dangerous to yourself and others as the "false negative," missing a real danger. Skip Gochenour of the American Tactical Shooting Association, a highly experienced criminal investigator and the founder of the National Tactical Invitational, suggests "curiosity." Similar to the state that psychologist Ellen Langer calls "mindfulness," curiosity means an active awareness of one's environment. It prompts attention to the unusual and possibly significant events around us rather than the "mindless" acceptance of appearances. Used properly, curiosity/mindfulness can work in conjunction with habits of attention, as when the careful hunter automatically orients to a movement in the brush but holds fire until a target is consciously confirmed.

The message here is simple: a race bike doesn't make you a racer, and weapons don't make you a fighter. In fact, skill is much more important than equipment, especially in self-defense. Simple, reliable tools in skilled hands will yield a better result than the newest, most innovative tools in unskilled hands. Take the money you'd spend on the latest high-tech blaster or titanium exhaust system and get solid instruction. Then practice, and practice some more.

Tactics

I'll define "tactics" as "actions one can take to influence the occurrence or outcome of a confrontation." This leads to the consideration of some issues not usually included in tactical discussions, but which bear thought. To reiterate, the first responsibility of an armed citizen is to avoid trouble. Thus, the first aspect of tactics to discuss is avoidance.

Avoidance tactics.

John Farnam teaches three simple rules for avoiding confrontations: "Don't go to stupid places, don't hang out with stupid people, and don't do stupid things." These are fine general principles, but need some elaboration.

Stupid places.

These are any places where trouble is likely—encountering a robbery in progress, a collection of aggressive, hostile people, or reckless, antisocial actions. Sometimes, there is no choice. If you're almost out of gas it's better to stop at the seedy-looking convenience store than to try to stretch the fumes in your tank to the well-lit station you hope is down the road. A little foresight—filling up before you need to, for instance—will minimize these hard choices. On a trip, knowing your route and planning your stops beats taking a room in a rundown motel with questionable guests. The family restaurant may be boring compared to the colorful-looking biker's bar, but the patrons are less likely to test your toughness. This last, by the way, comes from a friend's experience. He and two other men were on a ride through the Appalachians and stopped for dinner at a roadside tavern. They ended up running away from a gang of local bullies at high speed, in the dark, over unfamiliar country roads. They escaped by riding down a dirt road and hiding themselves and their bikes in the brush. That's not my idea of a fun evening.

You can find similar excitement in any city as well, for instance at the street racer's hangouts or the "party areas" of town. In Atlanta, for example, the Buckhead restaurant-and-club neighborhood attracts groups of young men, often drunk or stoned and looking for trouble. The streets are typically jammed and the sidewalks crowded. The past few years have seen a dramatic escalation in violence over seemingly minor incidents. There are areas like this in any city, and they're all places you don't want to be.

A final word of caution: The police take an interest in these "stupid places." They can't tell you from the rest of the crowd. They'll not be sympathetic when they find your pistol, knife, pepper spray, etc., no matter how good your Second Amendment arguments are.

Stupid people.

People who are aggressive, thoughtless, careless, or exhibitionistic fit the definition of "stupid," regardless of IQ. Stupid places attract stupid people, but they can be found anywhere. Unfortunately, some of the places they're found are those with the best roads, where they push the edge of the envelope and die a lot in the process. They also create hostility among local people, hostility that's applied to anyone on a motorcycle. This provides a handy excuse for anyone with antisocial tendencies to provoke trouble. I'm told the same kind of behavior occurs in popular off-road riding areas as well. Give these people a wide berth. If there's a big group gathered at a local stopping place, don't hook up with them. Continue your ride well before or after they've left. Ride with people you know and trust.

These days one doesn't hear so much about the "biker gangs" that got so much press in the 50's and 60's. In my experience, the biker clubs these days are likely to be composed of middle-class people and professionals enjoying the "Harley lifestyle." Even back in "the day" groups like the Angels, Outlaws, Pagans, and so forth didn't seem to start trouble with those who weren't their rivals, and were pretty tolerant of skinny kids on little Hondas, like I was. If I ran into any like them today I'd be respectful, reserved, and wish them a safe ride. They may or may not be looking for trouble, but chances are they're not looking for trouble with you.

Stupid things.

It's safe to say that no one ever does something stupid intentionally. Having done a few stupid things myself, I can testify that none of them seemed stupid at the time. Fractions of a second later, maybe, but not at that moment.

Stupid things are those that are likely to provoke or exacerbate a conflict. Pushing the riding envelope on the street or in a public riding area counts as stupid, not just because it might hurt you, but also because it provokes hostility that can easily create a confrontation. That doesn't mean you have to ignore the challenges of a winding road or expert-class trail, only that you need to scale back to 75% or so, and avoid treating others on the road as competitors. If you need to test your skills, go racing or to a track day. You'll come away humbler, and be a safer rider for it.

Making a lot of noise is also stupid, for the same reason. It attracts attention, angers people, and perhaps provides an excuse for aggression. Sport riders and cruisers are equally guilty here. The ironic thing is that, on a modern bike, there's no need for it. While aftermarket pipes can save weight and add power, the amount of noise they make is a poor indicator of their effectiveness. With proper tuning, you can get the performance and exhaust tone you want without window-rattling volume.

Remember, too, that if you run into trouble, assigning responsibility is a matter of judgment. Witnesses and police officers who've already stereotyped you as an antisocial jerk because you made a lot of noise are much more likely to see you as causing or contributing to a conflict, regardless of your actual behavior. This is not what you need in the aftermath of a lethal-force situation.

Perhaps the most stupid thing you can do on a motorcycle is act in a threatening manner. We've all been stuck behind RVs, minivans, trucks, etc. going maddeningly slow on our favorite roads. Likewise, we've all had to avoid some oblivious airhead who turns in front of us or pulls out of a driveway without even trying to look. The middle-finger salute and a stream of invective are almost automatic responses. Don't do it. Things escalate. Recently, a Marine just home from Iraq was killed in a late-night confrontation. From the news reports, there was a conflict with another driver, he got out of his car, and was shot as he approached the other driver's door. While his killer was certainly in the wrong, the Marine's temper and poor judgment were contributing factors, and no amount of punishment for the shooter will bring him back.

Traffic tactics.

Sometimes trouble finds you. When you're in traffic the best way to deal with a threat is to escape, especially if you have a passenger. This is where the low-speed skills matter most.

Be ready. When stopped in traffic, leave the bike in first gear. If you need to hold it on a hill, use the front brake with your index and middle fingers, keeping your thumb and last two fingers on the throttle. Don't blip the throttle, as cool as it might seem. You don't want to be caught in mid-blip. If you need to stand up and stretch, do it, then get back into gear.

Be alert. Look around. Pay attention to people in cars, on the sidewalk, crossing the street. Use your mirrors to check the 4-8 o'clock area. Being ready and being alert have saved me twice, once from a Kenworth whose driver didn't notice me waiting to turn and once from a group of urban youths who objected to my presence in their neighborhood. While both incidents happened many years ago, they've stayed with me.

Create space. Leave enough space between you and the car in front to see its rear wheels. This gives you maneuvering room, if necessary. Also, stay to the right or left side of the traffic lane. Besides keeping you out of the oil slick that forms in the center of the lane, this gives you a little more room to move.

Avoid the middle lane of multi-lane roads. My experience is that the right lane is faster, and if threatened you can easily jump the curb and ride away on the sidewalk. Use your natural advantages. A motorcycle is more agile than a car, especially in traffic. It can fit through gaps a car can't. If you're being threatened or pursued, use these advantages to put distance between

yourself and the attackers. I'm not recommending that you use other people as cover, only that you take every opportunity to distance yourself from someone meaning you harm. If that means lane splitting or diving across several lanes of traffic, and that's the only way to prevent being shot or rammed, do it.

Plan ahead. Whether you're cruising in the country, gridlocked downtown, blasting a trail, or challenging the local racer road, you should be thinking ahead. This is standard good-rider practice—preparing for the driveway that might be around the blind curve, the SUV driver (the one with the latte and cell phone) who notices her exit but not you just behind her right quarter-panel, and all the other normal hazards. Add to that the road-raging guy who's been cut off once too often, the opportunistic thief in the urban parking lot, the carload of punks who decide to have some fun with you. How will you deal with a threat *right now*? Make it a habit to select escape and evasion routes as you ride. Be mindful of the changing dynamics of the road, the landscape, traffic patterns, potential hazards and opportunities. While you're riding, think about riding, and save the rest for later.

Fighting tactics.

Finally, we get to fighting. This is appropriate because, once again, fighting is the very last option. That doesn't mean it can be neglected or treated as an afterthought, only that every other option should be exhausted before you go to combat mode.

I'm not going to duplicate the advice of those who make a living from self-defense instruction. Movement, the use of cover, the need for violent, immediate action once a threat is revealed—all of that is basic, and anyone who is serious about self-defense needs to learn it. What follows is some motorcycle-specific advice based on my own riding experience, research, and extrapolations from what several very competent people have tried to teach me.

I originally thought that the best source of tactics would be the firearms instruction given to motorcycle officers. After studying the little I could find written about it, I no longer think so. There are three reasons for this conclusion. First, motorcycle officers don't carry concealed. Carrying openly changes a lot. Second, they go looking for trouble, insofar as it's their job to enforce laws. That means first that they're exposed to more danger. Second, they often get to choose the time, place, and manner of exposure. You won't. Third and most important, I think some of their training is wrong.

Movement.

Get off the bike, as fast as possible. I've seen photos of police trainees shooting from a standing position, straddling their bikes. This fixes you in position, and gives your opponent an easy target. Get off and move, to cover if possible. If you have a companion, they'll need to move first. Make sure any passenger you have knows this and is able to dismount quickly.

Police training teaches that the officer should dismount from the "high side" (the right) during a traffic stop, keeping the bike between him (or her) and the car. This is a good idea if you're choosing the time and place; it provides an obstacle against an attack and keeps the car and its occupants in the officer's sight. If your bike is taller than a police Harley, though, it may not be possible. You also may not have time to extend the side stand. Drop the bike and step over it, then move to cover while keeping the bike between you and your adversaries, if possible.

Cover.

Anyone with defensive firearms training has learned to use cover, so I won't discuss the basics here. There's one point, though, that's vital for the armed rider to understand. Your bike is not good cover. I say this even though Sgt. Jim Polan, an experienced motorcycle officer, recommends using the bike as cover (see www.motorcops.com). He even reports ballistic testing of a police motorcycle, showing it to be highly resistant to penetration by common handgun rounds as well as .223 ammunition. That's fine as far as it goes, but neglects a basic fact: If the motorcycle has just stopped, the engine and exhaust will be hot. If the bike is used as cover, some rounds are likely to hit the gas tank. Gas on a hot engine will either ignite or create a

cloud of fumes easily ignited by a muzzle blast. While nobody, to the best of my knowledge, has tested this reasoning, I certainly don't intend to be the first.

Sgt. Polan also recommends that officers remove their helmets when behind cover, since the helmet provides no ballistic protection and may, by increasing the diameter of the officer's head, give away his or her position. There are two problems here: One, it's necessary to pay attention to the D-rings and the chinstrap in order to remove the helmet, and I don't think divided attention helps combat performance. Two, it isn't possible to remove a full-face helmet unless you use both hands, especially if you're wearing glasses. Keep your helmet on until the danger is past. Yes, it will be harder to shoot this way. Practice.

Shooting while riding.

Don't. Not ever. Even if your pistol is available to your left hand, you'll need to draw it from concealment, then try to hit a moving target while you're also moving, controlling the bike with one hand, and avoiding return fire in traffic. The only thing you're likely to hit with a bullet is a luckless bystander, and you're very likely to hit a car, truck or some immobile piece of scenery with your bike and body.

True, during the 30's the California Highway Patrol installed left-hand throttles so their officers could fire while in hot pursuit (see www.motorcops.com), but there's no evidence this was ever an effective tactic. Besides, what may or may not have been a good police pursuit tactic against Bonnie & Clyde wannabes on the rural roads of 75 years ago doesn't apply to the armed citizen of today. It's dangerous to you and others, it's ineffective, and it's immoral. *Don't.*

Off the bike.

There's really not much motorcycle-specific advice here, as when you're relaxing, shopping or sightseeing, all the standard self-defense lessons apply. There are a few issues worth mentioning, though. First, remember that when putting a helmet on or taking it off, you're vulnerable. Scan the area before you park or prepare to ride. If there are suspicious people, ride on past or walk away. If someone engages you in conversation at the bike, try to move so as to put all or part of the bike (for instance, the handlebar) between you—and don't forget that the person asking you so many questions might have a partner behind you. Move, and look.

If you carry your helmet with you, fasten the chinstrap and carry it in your support hand. If attacked, it makes a handy impact weapon or it can be thrown as a distraction. Use an old beat-up helmet for practice so the move is automatic. If a fight has started, you don't want to hesitate because you're worried about your new helmet's graphics or pearl paint.

A friend recently showed me another clever distraction tactic. If you wear a ball cap, you can grab the bill with your support hand and slap your attacker across the face with it. This might buy you enough time to execute a combative tactic or to move and reach a weapon.

Conclusion.

My intent is not to teach motorcyclists to be mounted warriors. If you are training for self-defense, armed or not, you should have already adopted the warrior mindset: "I *will* win." Without that, all the training in the world is just recreation. You should also have the responsible citizen's mindset: "I will fight *only* when necessary." Without both, you're either kidding yourself or on the way to becoming a bully. I've tried to offer some advice to help make your ride more secure without sacrificing the freedom, fellowship, fun, and fulfillment of motorcycling. Ride safe!