

# Highways of horror?

AS I write this the October long weekend is done and dusted for another year. In NSW we had wet roads, the usual traffic chaos and of course a few fatal accidents thrown in for good measure.

I heard about one particular crash which saw at least three people killed from one car which had hit a truck. Of course this is terrible news, especially when the people involved were so young. It's also very difficult for the emergency service personnel to deal with the aftermath.

I know what it's like to see dead bodies tangled up in car accidents. Obviously it's no fun, and the main reason why I eventually left my previous career. Seeing death on a regular basis changes you inside and for many there will be no going back to the person you once were.

A newspaper report about this crash quoted a senior NSW Police crash investigator who said words to the effect he was

mortified drivers didn't slow down, drove dangerously and continued to kill themselves regularly. He went on to say he didn't know what else the authorities had to do to make people drive to the conditions etc. It's easy to say things when you are emotional but the facts sometimes get a little lost in such situations.

It's also easy to blame a particular driver or rider as being irresponsible, out of control or whatever, but like life, nothing is ever black and white.

I believe our poorly designed roads and driver awareness play a major part in these accidents. I don't know the full facts regarding the particular accident I've mentioned but I understand it was on the Bells Line of Road near Bilpin. The newspaper report also quoted a driver who was one of the first at the scene of the accident. He mentioned the car which was involved in the crash had overtaken him before losing control and hitting the truck, and he was at or near the front of a queue of something like 15 vehicles.

Many of Cycle Torque's readers will know the Bells Line of Road and also be aware of how limited the overtaking opportunities are, and how ridiculously low some of the speed limits on that road are. On a Friday night at the start of a long weekend it doesn't take much for a long line of cars to bank up and drivers to become very frustrated and then make some poor decisions.

Can you lay the blame entirely at the feet of a poor girl who made a bad decision which ultimately cost lives? What about the drivers near the front who are too afraid to go one kilometre over the speed limit for fear of losing their licences on a double demerit weekend? Do you not look in the mirror and see a plethora of cars behind you and think, 'maybe I might just pull over here and get myself out of this situation'?

A long time ago I worked at Lithgow and it was part of my job to patrol the end of the Bells Line of Road. I remember coming up on a queue of over 40 cars which were following a very slow truck. I could see the danger and eventually made my way past the throng of cars to stop the truck. As I got out of the car drivers were giving me thumbs' up and bipping their horns. When I spoke to the older gent driving the truck he was incensed I had stopped him because it was his right to drive at such a slow speed. The issue of course wasn't entirely about his speed but the fact he had no idea or even



cared about the impact he was having on the psyche of the drivers behind him who were a breath away from making an overtaking move, one they normally wouldn't make, which could have ended in disaster.

I was a professionally trained driver and rider who was taught to see danger in so many aspects of traffic. Unfortunately not many drivers have this training, it's almost like two people can see the same thing but only one can register it being a potential problem.

I'm not trying to lay the blame at anyone's feet but to make the point there's always much more to a crash than meets the eye.

I am sick of hearing the the authorities go on about road deaths being unacceptable. While ever you have cars on the road you will have deaths involving them. It is as simple as that.

I get the same feeling when the prime minister or some politician talks about just one soldier dying in the line of duty is unacceptable. Hello! If you send our soldiers overseas where people are trying to kill them then expect some of them to be killed. Don't want them to die? Don't send them.

You get the impression when Police talk about the road toll during holiday periods that we are all loose units behind the wheel and out of control.

My family and I have just returned from a week at Surfers Paradise. We drove up in school holidays, and came back during the long weekend when the roads were wet. Did I exceed the speed limit during the trip? Maybe. Did I see other drivers exceeding the speed limit? Yes I did. How many lunatic drivers did I see during this week of unbridled spending and speeding? Not one for the entire 1500-plus kilometres.

The authorities have finally got their act together to a degree and made a decent chunk of the Pacific Highway from Newcastle to the Gold Coast dual lane. Maybe this has something to do with it?

It's easy to blame drivers for the carnage on our roads. They are only part of the problem.

– Chris Pickett



**On Highways of Horror**

Gday Chris,

Just wanted to say how spot on you were with your 'Highway of Horror' editorial.

I spent 15 years with Victoria Police, the last 8 years at traffic units, including five years riding on and off-road bikes with a two year stint as an instructor.

In that time I saw drivers and riders do some stupid things but you know the biggest excuse I heard, "I wasn't speeding", and that was the thing that frustrated me the most. With this constant push on so-called speeding, the government has bred a population of drivers who think that as long as they are driving 5 km/h under the speed limit they are safe where in fact they are constantly distracted by looking at their speedo and not concentrating on what is around them.

As you said they also think it's their right to drive slowly regardless of the chaos and frustration they cause behind them again bred by the government's constant campaign on speeding. It has been said for years, but the government doesn't listen. We need a serious rehash of our driver/rider training in this country. When you are taught to drive a police vehicle it's all about being aware of your surroundings, reading traffic and identifying hazards and potential dangers. When you obtain a civilian licence there is none of that. All you have to do is drive around the block and make sure you stay under the speed limit.

We need to get real on road safety in this country and not make it an easy cash cow for the government.

**Anthony Wolfe**

**Rubber and lugagge**

Hi Chris,

I am intrigued by two trends that have not been commented on by Motorcycle journalists.

1. The standard front tyre size for most large road bikes is width 120, sidewall 70, wheel 17 since about 1996. The rear has continued to grow.
2. Panniers have grown to ridiculous widths, some times exceeding the bike fairing width by 30 cm on

**More Horror**

Dear Chris,

I've just read your November editorial, 'Highways of Horror' and feel you should be congratulated. I doubt I have ever read a more informed and accurate description of the reasons for the terribly sad outcomes on our public roads. The few personal experiences you have related in this piece go a long way toward explaining exactly what happens prior to many crashes, fatal and otherwise. I was particularly struck with your comment at the beginning of the article about the quality of roads and driver awareness being the two main culprits contributing to the road toll. Of course driver awareness would have to be the priority of the two. This is not to say

that road condition is not poor in many parts of the country. What I'm trying to say Chris is that the majority of drivers who crash have absolutely no understanding of how easy it is to kill themselves. Then there is the added hazard of diesel spill and other pollutants on the road. And never forget those of us who are still alive due to the skill of others.

The arrogance and lack of courtesy displayed by that old truck driver you mentioned is symptomatic of the road rage problem which contributes in no small way to motorists and riders taking unnecessary risks and again, congratulation to you for grasping the nettle and pulling the cretin over. These days it seems that the traffic police, who think they are protecting us from ourselves, would prefer to issue infringement notices to those who pass this type of selfish and or poorly skilled driver than initiate a bit of proactive thought.

And finally Chris, I am also sick to my back teeth with the bleating from senior cops and politicians who wring their hands on camera while stating how terrible it all is. Perhaps you could send each traffic branch in the country a copy of the editorial and maybe, just maybe a few of them might finally get it.

Education is the key as I'm sure you know Chris, and lots and lots of rider/driver training. Without that the hand wringers are wasting their time, and my tax dollars.

Thanks for listening and again, a beaut article.

**Pete Boniface.**

**Cairns. North Qld.**