

All pumped up

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Fifty-four people have died in the course of NSW high-speed police pursuits during the past decade. In this letter to our readers, a disillusioned former officer describes the sick thrill of the chase.

A police chase was one of the most incredible experiences I have had, and the closest I have come to dying. I know police who spend their lives trying to get into pursuits because it is such an adrenaline boost.

Pursuits are an intricate part of the predominantly male culture of young police, particularly in inner-city areas and the highway patrol. They invariably become a pissing competition between the police and the crooks to see who is a better driver. When that dangerous mix of testosterone and adrenaline kicks in, all reason goes out the window.

I know of a detectives' office which had "pursuit tapes" in all their cars. They would put them into the tape deck immediately after starting a pursuit. These tapes were recordings of heavy metal and other high energy music, which I guess they felt added to the experience of the pursuit.

Until about a month ago, I was in the NSW Police and finished up as a detective senior constable. I resigned after seven years' service because of serious concerns I had about the NSW Police as an organisation.

I worked for a number of years at several inner-city police stations. During this time, I was involved in a number of police pursuits as one of the pursuing officers. I have witnessed the aftermath of numerous others and have been involved in "critical incident teams" that have investigated other police when the shit hit the fan.

There is probably no other feeling quite like being in a car chase.

In 2000, I was patrolling an inner-city suburb in an unmarked car looking for a stolen turbocharged Subaru which had been involved in a couple of other chases throughout the night. In the car with me were two other male police. We were all in our early 20s and I would consider us to be all good, keen young police.

I was in the back seat and the two others were driver and front passenger. About midnight, the driver spotted the Subaru from about 300 metres moving with its lights off. Our driver accelerated and we started to catch up to it. The surge of adrenaline at this time is indescribable. On the first corner we went through as we tried to catch up, the driver lost control and we almost hit a pole. He was a good driver but the surge of adrenaline is so great that you can't function for 20 or so

seconds.

This "lose" kind of shook us all out of the adrenaline surge and the driver started driving like we knew he could. We caught up to the Subaru probably only because its driver wanted us to.

Meanwhile, I was giving details of where we were, what speed the stolen car was doing and other information to the radio operator. We were going that quick that the front passenger had to hold the flashing light down on the roof or it would be blown off.

The radio operator keeps asking you questions and you have to answer them as calmly as possible. They are trying to judge whether you are in control and thus able to conduct the chase in a safe and reasoned manner. Somehow, a calm came over me and I was able to give the information to the radio operator without panic in my voice.

They constantly ask you for speeds, but it is a well-known technique to either grossly underestimate the speeds or give them when you are turning corners (and hence going slower).

However, I quickly realised that the driver had "tunnel vision" or "missile lock", in that he was focused on the stolen car and nothing else.

Next, we went over to the wrong side of the road in a roundabout to overtake a car unrelated to the pursuit. We would have been doing at least 120kmh.

We soon got out onto a major road which had two lanes in each direction. The Subaru was punching red lights without slowing down. I think we went through at least two red lights at about 180kmh.

It was just pure luck that we weren't killed.

Shortly after, a highway patrol car came up behind us and took over the chase. Before long, two or three other highway patrol cars joined the first. By this stage we had passed through about 15 suburbs.

The radio operator terminated the pursuit but the highway patrol supervisor (who was in one of the pursuing cars) overruled the decision and the pursuit continued.

Shortly after this, the Subaru approached an intersection where two lanes of traffic were banked back about 100 metres from a red light. The Subaru went to the "dark side" (the wrong side of the road) and about three highway patrol cars went with him.

I heard the words "box him in, box him in" come over the ghost channel (this is a channel that can be heard by the cars in the immediate vicinity, but not by the radio operator who is monitoring the pursuit).

One highway car overtook the Subaru at high speed and pulled in front of him. Another pulled up by the driver's side and a third came up right behind him. This was all on the wrong side of the road, approaching a major intersection at high speed. The highway cars slowed down in unison, but the Subaru was able to scoot out to the left and off through the intersection.

About 10 suburbs later, a highway patrol car rammed the Subaru in the middle of a major intersection. Police are strictly forbidden from ramming cars during pursuits, but it happens all the time. The highway patrol officer who rammed the Subaru told me that the stolen car had "reversed into the police car" as he winked at me.

The driver and passenger of the stolen car got out and ran, but were caught shortly after.

The driver was 14 and the passenger 18. I sat with both of them in the cells back at the police station and we shared our own experiences of the chase. They told me that they had both been in hundreds of chases and it was clear that they baited police into chasing them because the adrenaline rush that came with it was like a drug.

Neither offender got a jail sentence arising from this pursuit and the 14-year-old was arrested after another chase only a week or so later.

Pursuits are just madness. There is such a disparity between the magnitude of the risk to those involved and the public and the consequences of the best possible outcome (that is, arrest, charge and conviction of the offender for generally minor offences) that any rational person would never let them happen.

The way police chase is ridiculous. It's out of control. Highway patrol officers, in particular, ram cars to end pursuits. In an inner-city highway patrol office one day, I heard two highway patrol officers recounting their recent efforts in ramming cars to end pursuits and how you could make it look like something which fits within police policy guidelines.

Police management say that if pursuits were banned, people would know that if they failed to stop when directed to do so by police they would get away with it. However, many offending drivers engage in pursuits purely for the buzz it gives them. In my experience, they are invariably male and in their mid-teens. These are not people who can effectively judge risks and make reasoned choices about how their actions could affect themselves and others.

The only real way to solve such problems as motor vehicle theft is thorough investigation. I have seen time and again how good, methodical police work can result in crooks of all ages being charged with car theft offences without the police ever chasing them.

When I undertook my advanced driver training course at Goulburn, a group of old highway patrol officers recounted war story after war story about the completely irresponsible pursuits in which they took part. Then they would say "but you can't do that any more". You could just see it in the faces of the early-20s male police on the course that all they wanted to do was go out on the streets and start chasing cars.

The author asked that his name not be revealed, fearing a possible "square-off" by former colleagues who think disaffected former police officers should remain silent.

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