

White Mice Ride Harleys

I remember in the earliest days of my Army career, I saw MP's patrolling stateside installations on police motorcycles, equipped with flashing lights and siren. During my 1965 trip to Saigon, I observed on many occasions the tail end of a multi-year ludicrous U.S. Embassy construed experiment, that was both hilarious and melancholy to watch. Mentioning the topic of this story with my next door neighbor, he verified that he saw Vietnamese National Police (referred to as White Mice) riding Harley Davidson Motorcycles in 1963-64 while stationed in Saigon with AFN (Armed Forces Radio Network.) The term "White Mice" by the Americans derived from the white uniforms worn by the national police and their seemingly ineptness to enforce the Vietnamese regulations, laws and ordinances.

The concept of motorcycle cops had merit allowing the national police access to zig-zag, meander or other wise maneuver through the bumper to bumper constantly stalled traffic encountered in Saigon. The two wheeled motorcycles allowed the police a great edge in circumventing the traffic jams when responding to emergency calls, by slipping, sliding and weaving through the dense traffic. The problem was that the American Embassy introduced the big "HOGS" of the motorcycle industry, instead of the lower powered Japanese versions, such as the Honda, Yamaha or Kawasaki cycles preferred by the Vietnamese civilians.

Only a select group of the national police were chosen to ride the Harleys. The rest walked their beat or rode in cars. It was almost a laughable sight to witness the dwarf oriental national police making a feeble attempt to handle the American motorcycles. Just their physical stature was a handicap in controlling the big bikes. Most looked like adolescent kids on the cycles. The American serviceman stood nearly a foot taller and close to double the weight of the average Vietnamese male. Most Vietnamese cycle policemen must have thought they were riding a wild bull, rather than a manmade machine. A rodeo rider tries staying aboard a bull for only eight seconds. The cyclist cops had to ride these glorified mechanical bulls for an entire eight hour shift, every day.

Of the several dozen "White Mice" riding Harleys I recall seeing only one taller stocky burly Vietnamese cop that appeared to have more than a novice command of the bike and seemed competent in handling the American cycle. Every motorcycle police officer wore a cinch belt that resembled a boxer's championship belt, around his waist to hold in their guts and provide some confidence or other status symbol to the policeman, while riding the American bikes.

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For the smaller Vietnamese, their height, weight and bone structure added to the complexity of controlling the police Harleys. Most "White Mice" cyclists seemed intimidated by the colossal Harley. Sitting in the seat, most cyclist "White Mice" feet couldn't touch the ground. I recall one officer nearly had an accident trying to stop the monstrous bike. I have qualms believing that none but the bravest ever opened the throttle beyond first gear. The Vietnamese police couldn't harness the enormous bikes. The vast majority were visually shaken from their experience riding the Harleys. They openly displayed fear or terror in their eyes and facial features. Some were so distraught drained of stamina and agility, that when arriving at an emergency call, they couldn't perform rudimentary police procedures. I eyewitnessed one "White Mouse" that was so dispondent, I think I saw tears in his eyes from his harrowing experience aboard his Harley getting to the emergency.

G.I. cycle enthusiast serving in Saigon asserted the "White Mice" Harleys were powered by two different motors, depending on which serviceman you spoke with. They were equally divided between a 350 and 370 cubic centimeter motor. Contacting a Harley Davidson dealer, I was informed the police versions of that era had two motors a 61 and 74 cubic inch motor, providing 50 to 60 horsepower. That amount of horsepower exceeded most of the French built autos then in Vietnam, and a good reason for fear and dismay by the national police when mounted on a two wheeled vehicle.

I saw Citroen, Peugeot, Fiat, and Renault Dauphine cars in Vietnam. The big Citroen DS-19 had a 65 (Brake Horsepower) motor. The Renault with its 845C.C. engine produced a modest 38 BHP. The Peugeot and Fiat auto probably had 35 to 40 horsepower motors. To shackle the Harley's power the "White Mice" cyclist only salvation was the unconscionable, either training wheels or a sidecar attachment, but these would negate any advantage of two wheels in heavy traffic.

Returning to Saigon in late 1966, the motorcycle "White Mice" were gone. I never questioned their absence. Attrition from accidents, inadequate maintenance and/or repair parts and lack of volunteers for the program all probably played a contributing factor in disbanding the experiment.

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