

APR 17, 2003



LUCE N7208
PRESS CLIPPINGS



Staff photo by Mike Helm

Highway Patrol trooper Daniel Hilburn assists a motorist whose van was stuck in the mud on the shoulder of U.S. 74 near Whiteville Friday afternoon. Hilburn, a 10-year veteran, drives one of the Patrol's new Camaros.

High-tech troopers highly effective

By MIKE HELM

FRONT PAGE

While other law enforcement agencies make headlines with arrests in high-profile drug cases and violent crimes, North Carolina Highway Patrol officers work every day protecting public safety with little recognition of their efforts.

Troopers do find drugs and arrest big-time felons during traffic stops but their primary job, according to Trooper Daniel Hilburn, is to protect the public safety through the effective enforcement of traffic laws.

Hilburn, a Columbus County native and 10-year veteran of the Highway Patrol, drives one of the Patrol's new Camaros. Hilburn served four years in the army and one year as a police officer in Chadburn before joining the Highway Patrol. He is assigned to the Whiteville Highway Patrol station but the Camaro is his real office.

Equipped with a laptop computer known as a mobile data terminal and wireless uplink, the car connects Hilburn to the Highway Patrol's communications network and nationwide criminal databases.

He can use it to find out if a vehicle is stolen or a driver

"I like the Camaro ... If a speeder passes you at 90 mph, you can catch up to them quickly. That's safer than running behind a violator at 100 mph for a long distance."

Trp. Daniel Hilburn

is wanted for a crime. He can also use it to see where other troopers are deployed or to type them messages using the Highway Patrol's own version of a chat line. In fact, Hilburn said that troopers usually communicate using the computer because it cuts down on radio traffic.

The laptop contains all of the official forms Hilburn needs to do his job and when he does go to his other office, it's to use the printer and file reports.

The Camaros are equipped with video cameras and troopers wear microphones. Hilburn said that suspects, especially drunk drivers, usually calm down and start behaving when they notice the video camera in the car.

The most amazing thing about the Camaro is its quick acceleration. Equipped with an LS1 Corvette motor, the Camaro is rated for 165 mph. However, Hilburn said that it's not flat-out speed that makes the car so useful.

"I like the Camaro, not because of speed but because of its ability to catch up to violators. It's faster from 0-100 mph than any car around. If a speeder passes you at 90 mph, you can catch up to them quickly. That's safer than running behind a violator at 100 mph for a long distance."

The car has a useful life of 70,000 miles, which it will reach in about two-and-one-half years. Then it will be sold, probably to a police department or sheriff's office, and he will get a new one. Hilburn and the car stay together like a cowboy and his horse. He takes it everywhere on duty and brings it home with him when he's off duty.

Before Hilburn could drive the Camaro, he was trained in high speed, pursuit and precision driving at the Highway Patrol's track in Raleigh.

Troopers receive more training than other law enforcement officers. The Highway Patrol's training academy in Raleigh is a six-month-long, boot-camp-like program. Most police officers and sheriff's deputies, by contrast, receive 16 weeks of basic law enforcement training at a community college before starting on the job, although some larger cities have their own police training academies with more intensive training.

Most of Hilburn's time is spent patrolling and conducting accident investigations. Accident investigation is a science requiring knowledge of physics and mathematics and training in gathering evidence at the scene.

He also spends time following school buses to protect children from impatient drivers.

Hilburn is passionate in his pursuit of drunk drivers and speeders, who are responsible for most wrecks involving death and serious injury.

"Alcohol impairs judgement and physical abilities. Alcohol and driving is a deadly combination," he said.

Although Hilburn believes the current drunk-driving laws are effective, he would like to see one change.

"If you could take some of these people to accident scenes where someone was killed or seriously injured, it might help them make better decisions," he said.

One of Hilburn's relatives was a trooper in the 1940s. That family connection and just seeing troopers around when he was younger sparked his interest in the Highway Patrol.

When he's not at work, Hilburn is at home with his wife Christie and 16-year-old stepson, who wants to be a judge.

Christie Hilburn appreciates the dangerous job her husband has and admits to worrying when he is late or working at night. She said her husband is squeaky clean at work and off duty.

"He always drives the speed limit off duty. And I won't drive in the same part of the county he's patrolling because he'd give me a ticket," she said.



