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The police car of choice has a deadly record

By Linda Fantin
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Officer Christopher Witte is not happy. It's his first traffic stop of the night, and he just got a flat tire on a busy stretch of the busiest interstate in Utah.

As he loosens the lug nuts, his eyes dart back and forth from the wheel to the freeway, where a mix of cars, trucks and semitrailers, whose drivers are aware that Witte can't chase after them, whiz past at speeds well above the 65-mph limit. Only a few bother to shift lanes out of courtesy.

Exactly five years ago, Witte was parked on I-15 near Centerville, writing a ticket, when the driver of a Mazda minivan turned to flick a bug off his girlfriend, drifted into the emergency lane, and crushed the Ford Crown Victoria like a soda can. Had Witte seen it coming, he would have tensed up and possibly snapped his neck. Instead, the 6-foot, 7-inch trooper bounced around the passenger compartment like a lotto ball, landing face up, with his feet in the driver's seat. The back seat was gone, and the fuel tank, punctured by the Vic's rear axle, had spilled 20 gallons of gasoline onto the shoulder.

One spark and he would have burned to a crisp. At least that's what the firefighter who arrived on the scene told him.

Since then, 11 law enforcement officers around the country have burned to death when the fuel tanks on their Crown Victorias exploded, bringing the total since 1983 to 15. Several others have survived but were seriously injured. That might not seem like many considering there are about 400,000 Crown Victoria Police Interceptors the official name of the souped-up cars sold to law enforcement -- in use, and that police vehicles are more likely to be rammed from behind at high speeds. But, according to auto safety watchdog groups, more people have been incinerated in Crown Victoria Police Interceptors than in the Ford Pinto, the car known for its exploding gas tank and that was recalled in 1978.

The deaths have prompted three dozen police departments, along with crash victims and their families, to sue Ford. Agencies in Dallas, Chicago and Phoenix have suspended all new purchases of the popular police car. The union for State Police Troopers has urged its members not to stop on highways for non-emergencies, including routine tickets. And the nation's attorneys general have launched an investigation.

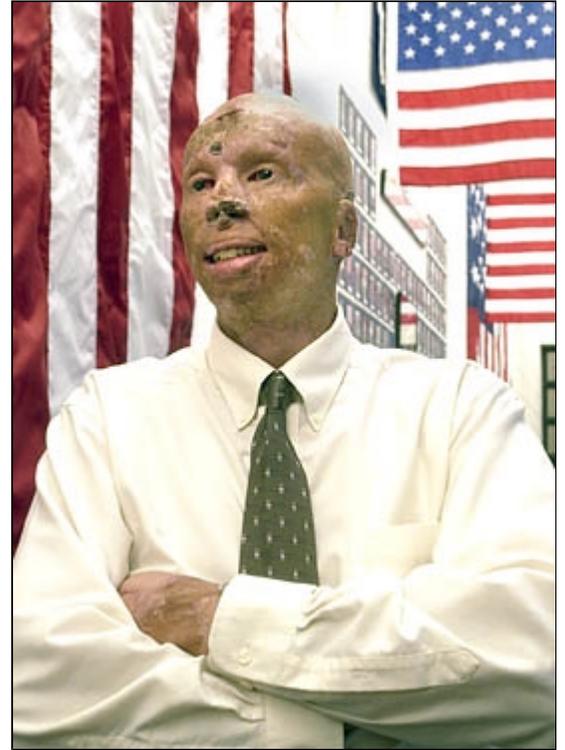
Witte's July 18, 1998, collision was his second high-speed, rear-end car accident in six months. The industry average is one serious accident every 20 years.

If he is thinking about any of this as he changes the flat tire, he doesn't let on.

In the crush zone: Unless you wear a police uniform, drive a taxicab, or belong to AARP, you probably don't know much about the Crown Vic. And unless you live in one of the 11 states where an officer was killed in a fiery crash -- Utah is not one of them -- you probably don't know much about the Crown Vic controversy.

The problem is one of position.

The Crown Vic, first built in 1979, is the only full-size, rear-wheel drive police car on the market. It also is the only car certified for police pursuit that still has its gas tank located behind the rear axle in the so-called crush zone. This is also true of other Fords built on the "Panther" platform, such as the Mercury Grand Marquis and Lincoln Town Car, the vehicle used to shuttle Gov. Mike Leavitt.



Jason Schechterle, a Phoenix officer who was severely burned when his Crown Victoria police car was hit, says Ford must make the car safer.
(Al Hartmann/The Salt Lake Tribune)

Unlike other cars, high speed rear-end crashes push the fuel tank of the full-size Fords against the rear axle or suspension system, which can cause it to rupture and catch fire. Ford has denied the cars are defective, a claim backed by the National Highway Transportation Safety Association. The NHTSA closed its investigation into Crown Vics in October 2002 after determining the vehicles leaked a minimal amount of fuel after being hit from behind at 30 mph, the federal standard. Ford tested the cars at 50 mph with the same results.

Still, Ford agreed to retrofit older models with plastic gas-tank shields, and developed an optional trunk liner to prevent sharp objects from puncturing the tanks.

"As long as drivers continue to strike stationary police vehicles at such high speeds, there will be fuel leaks, and in some instances, fires," Ford safety engineer Susan Cischke wrote in a June 2 letter to the Dallas city attorney. "While our sympathies go out to those involved in these tragic accidents, neither Ford nor any other auto manufacturer can eliminate the risk of fuel leaks in high-speed accidents."

Ford's response appears to have satisfied most of the country's 18,000-plus law enforcement agencies, including the Utah Department of Public Safety and the Salt Lake County Sheriff's Office. Fleet managers in both agencies say they have retrofitted nearly all of their older Crown Vics with the plastic fuel bladders in the state's case, approximately 300 vehicles. And, so far, they have experienced no problems.

Missouri wasn't so lucky. Eleven days before Ford sent its letter to Dallas, Missouri Highway Patrol officer Michael Newton burned to death in his 2003 Crown Victoria. His car had all the new safety features.

Ford dominates market: Police officers are like NASCAR drivers. Their cars are their livelihoods. They take pictures of them and devote Web sites to them. But in car racing, there is competition.

Ford estimates that 85 percent of all police agencies use Crown Vics. They like its price, speed, large back seat and roomy trunk, and it doesn't kick up rocks in the median like front-wheel drives tend to do.

But law enforcement's love affair with Ford is as old as Ford itself. In his book *Ford Police Cars: 1932-1997* Indiana law officer and police-car buff Edwin Sanow traces Ford's police record in tender detail. There's even a pop quiz at the end.

Q: What year was the flathead, L-head V-8 introduced?

A: 1932 on the 221-ci V-8.

When your car is your office, knowing its engine size is no sillier than knowing what kind of processor your computer has. And in the automotive world, the flathead V-8 was the equivalent of the Intel Pentium II.

It had 25 more horsepower than the Model A four-cylinder and 5 more horsepower than Chevrolet's best engine, and while the use of the V-8 was not new, Sanow writes, "a V-8 at Ford prices was an automotive milestone."

Ford also was the first to develop a special "police package," a car with a heavier suspension, better brakes and other elements designed to hold up under extreme abuse.

These innovations helped keep Ford ahead of Chevy and Plymouth, writes Sanow, even in the 1950s and 1960s, when Ford sedans were too light and too narrow to qualify for major state contracts such as the California Highway Patrol (CHP). In 1969, Ford owned 70 percent of the squad-car market. Andy Griffith and Barney Fife liked them, too.

Then came the fuel crunch of the 1970s, forcing many manufacturers to make smaller cars with better gas mileage and reducing the variety of faster, full-size cars available to law enforcement. In 1981, Sanow writes, "overall police car performance was so bleak that no police car of any kind reached 120 mph."

Once again, it was Ford to the rescue. In 1982, the automaker unleashed the CHP Mustang, or, as Sanow calls it, "the Ford that chased Porsches for a living."

The Mustang, loaded with police equipment, could go from zero to 60 in 8.35 seconds, fast at that time, and would hit a top speed of just over 126 mph, and Utah patrol officers recall with fondness the way suspects would take one look at the long-nosed car and pull over.

"The Mustang stopped a pursuit before it happened," Witte says.

It also forced automakers to beef up their full-size cars or get out of the market.

Dodge and Plymouth discontinued their four-door police sedans in 1989, and Chevy dumped the Caprice after 1996. As Sanow notes, even the police package Mustang disappeared when many jurisdictions adopted nonpursuit policies, making the ability to top 120 mph less important.

By 1997, the year Christopher Witte became a trooper, the Crown Vic had no competition.

Reason to worry? Witte, 31, is a slightly taller version of officer Jim Reed from "Adam 12." He is married and lives in Layton. He is assigned to the Wasatch Front's 18-member DUI squad. His typical day starts around 5:30 p.m. and ends at 3:30 a.m., when, according to the Center for Auto Safety, the majority of fatal crashes involving patrol cars occur.

He calls drunken drivers "customers," and their cars "2,300-pound killing machines." Yet when it comes to his own safety and comfort, he is more matter-of-fact. "Of all the officers killed in the line of duty, the majority die in traffic accidents," he says. "You figure you make eight, nine, 10 stops a day, and being paranoid that many times a day would really wear on you."

No one, including Ford, can predict how a vehicle will react when struck from behind at highway speeds, he says, and catching on fire is not an officer's first concern.

"If I had been out of my vehicle on the driver's side, I'd be dead for sure," Witte says. "I'd have flown a couple of hundred feet and been a big pile of broken bones."

The point, says the director of the Center for Auto Safety, is that officers should not have to choose between dying on the side of the road or burning to death in their cars.

"The fundamental principle of crash fire safety is that if you survive the trauma of a crash, you should not die by fire," CAS executive director Clarence M. Ditlow wrote in a letter to Ford.

"No more 'Vic'-tims": If only it were that simple, says Jason Schechterle.

On March 26, 2001, the Phoenix police officer was pulled from his burning 1996 Crown Victoria, which had just been rammed by a taxicab going 90 mph. He was in the car only 90 seconds, long enough for the fire to sear most of his hands, neck, head and face, where all that remained were his lips. His hands had to be sewn into his abdomen to keep the exposed tendons from drying up.

He was in a coma for 2 1/2 months and hospitalized for five. He has no memory of the accident.

He can't say the same about the painful recovery. He has had 40 surgeries, amassed \$4 million in health-care bills, and estimates there will be \$2 million more before the doctors are finished.

Ten months after the accident, he still could not see and could barely walk, but on Jan. 13, 2002, Schechterle carried the Olympic torch as it made its way to Salt Lake City. On July 9, 2003, he visited the Olympic city himself, along with police partner Bryan Chapman, to tell his story to a class of police academy recruits.

He also had some harsh words for Ford. In February, Schechterle and his family sued the auto giant, claiming Crown Vics are "unreasonably dangerous." On his Web site, he sells bumper stickers that read "No more Crown 'Vic'-tims."

Schechterle, who is the same age as Christopher Witte, says forcing Ford to fix the fuel-tank problem has become his "main mission in life." He also says the federal standard of 30 mph is too low.

Because Ford has a monopoly on full-size police cruisers, the company has an obligation to make them safe for police work, Schechterle says.

"This is their office for 10 hours a day," he says. "We've gotta get that gas tank out of the crush zone."

In Arizona, where three police officers have burned to death in Crown Vic crashes, law enforcement agencies have outfitted the remaining cars with plastic shields and trunk protectors. They also are testing fire panels that would fit over the tank and release a fire-retardant powder on impact.

Schechterle understands that loyalty is a big part of police work and that most police departments are loyal to Ford. He used to feel the same way.

On the Net

* For more about the Ford Crown Victoria fuel-tank issue, log on to <http://www.cvpi.com> and <http://www.crownvictoriasafetyalert.com>.

