

## Breathless.

A while back, on Friday September 5<sup>th</sup> 2008, I spent a pleasant evening with the Alcohol Unit of the Waitakere Police District in Onehunga. And not we weren't testing drinks, but the drivers...

Arranged as a result of one of StratCon Partnership's Meet the Press events, the evening with the 'booze bus' was going to be not only educational in terms of how the Police do this job, but also an eye opener in 'how do people think they can do that?' terms.

Arriving at the site with Robert Barry (editor, Company Vehicle) in tow, the first thing that happened was, yup you guessed it, I was breath tested. Mind you I would have done the same to anyone driving a Ford Falcon FPV GT in bright Octane (read hideous orange)...

Meeting Sgt. Jamie Dempsey, in charge of the team, brought an immediate briefing on the "do's and don'ts" and the "how to's". All delivered with a cool efficient charm that, after chatting to him for the best part of 4 hours (on and off) on site gradually broke down to reveal a humorous side. As one of his long serving colleagues noted, you have to have a sense of humour in this job. As we found out during the evening...

ACC fund the booze bus programme through the Accident Prevention programme, New Zealand Police deliver the programme. Nearly every New Zealand driver living in an urban conurbation has been through a booze bus check point at least 4 times in the past three years. This data based on an average issued by ACC and the Police.

Friday night saw close on 800 drivers checked during a 6 hour period, roughly one every 2 minutes. For a Friday night there weren't too many going home following 'after-work' drinkies, some people are plainly worried that the 'one-for-the-road' will put them over the limit. Is the message getting through? Our stint was only 4 hours long and out of the total tested in that time, about 500, 104 were re-tested and 9 found over the limit. The results shortly.

Booze buses are about checking primarily for excess alcohol in the bloodstream whilst in charge of a motor vehicle. The New Zealand limits are clearly laid out in the Road Code and on the NZTA Website; they are: Adults 21 and older 80milligrams of alcohol per 100 millilitres of blood. 15-20 year olds the limit is 30 milligrams per 100 millilitres.

To put these into perspective for the 15-20 year olds the limit is 0.3 BAC (Blood Alcohol Count) anything lower doesn't register on the machinery – in other words you haven't had a drink. Therefore for the learner and restricted driver no drinking is the rule.

For adults, forget the myth that you can drink 2 pints of beer or 3 glasses of wine or 1 small spirits. The level of absorption depends entirely on you. You could adjust and make it 1 pint of beer, 2 glasses of wine and no spirits over the course of, say, four hours – the time we were at the checkpoint. Better still don't drink and drive – it's quite simple really.

Enough of the legalese.

Of real interest to us was how the Police operate the check points. The team with Sgt. Dempsey that night included a crew of 'newbies' with faces from the UK, Vietnam and Slovakia joining seasoned staff members from Henderson and Auckland. At all times the entire team acted with professional courtesy, a sense of humour and the utmost patience.

There were periods where, due to processing in the bus, the checkpoint went un-manned. Drivers passed through slowly and, in some cases, with palpable relief on their faces.

Up to four people can be processed at a time in the bus, which takes four officers, a data management officer and the boss – Jamie – overseeing the processing.

Processing the alleged drunk drivers is a time consuming and technically demanding process – no I'm not going to tell you how to try and beat the system. I am going to tell you if you are pulled into the bus, you are going to need to be level headed and calm.

Once read your rights the Police will provide you with a phone to call your lawyer – and you get a little sound proofed room to do that in – you get copies of your processing and they will even allow you to call a cab or dial-a-driver. The name of their game is to get you off the road, paperwork done and release you so you can get home safely. And not be a potential threat to other road users.

ACC task the Police with drink driving prevention, however the Police use the opportunity to ensure that things like tyres, warrants and registrations are up to date and legal. The number of people who were warned about low tread on tyres, mixing makes on the same axle, using a space saver spare for more than the maximum 80kms they can travel was more than Robert or I would have expected.

Those without Warrants were also high – at least 40 vehicles were ticketed for no valid Warrant of Fitness. Registrations out of date or non existent were about 20 over the same period.

A couple of Restricted license drivers found themselves working out how to tell Dad that they were stopped for having passengers in the car...and one restricted driver found himself trying to explain to the officers what he was doing on the road at 11.15pm with 2 passengers. \$ 800.00 in fines later and he and his passengers were taxiing home.

Others, though, were given the benefit of the doubt – in one case the father had collected his two daughters from their drunken mother and was moving them to a place of safety. Yes he'd had a couple of beers and was borderline, but commonsense prevailed.

Periodically the chase car would leap into action and hunt down those who had 'U-turned' to avoid the Booze bus, bringing back the offenders to be processed.

And those who were patently over the limit? One was 3.5 times the limit – and driving! Not only that he was on parole, had missed Probation Officer meetings, had warrants out for his arrest and on top of that lot, had no legal driving license. Why do we allow this to happen?

The others ranged from just under 1.5x up to 2.5x and all were booked processed and sent on their way – without car! Cars were either impounded or a relative came to collect it.

Our hosts told us that this was '...an average evening...' for a Friday night in Onehunga. They also told us that one driver had been stopped on Wednesday **and** Thursday evenings – both times over the limit. They were hoping for a hat-trick but were, happily, disappointed.

Come 11.30pm and the night began to wind down as traffic thinned and the processing continued. Lending a hand to clean up the team chatted about how they thought they had come across to us – the dreaded media... In particular the 'newbies' from Central Europe and Asia pressed to be assessed from the 'outside' on their performance.

Both had done exceptionally well handling the humour in a relaxed manner and, on the odd occasion we saw it, the so-called 'fun' aimed squarely at them.

Manning the Booze Bus isn't the easiest Police job in the world, it has the potential to be dangerous – you have no idea who is in the car with what weapon in hand – and it can be light hearted at times, like when the dog in the car tried to lick the hand held meter...

Whilst the four hours we spent with the team didn't fly past, we shared the pace of the evening with the Alcohol team – at times hectic at others simply asking people to count to ten. Again and again and again. As the evening wore on the team came to accept us – we didn't take pictures or notes – and as a result some more information was let out to us. And no we haven't shared it with you in this article.

Most people regard the Booze Buses as an inconvenience, a nuisance and an interruption. The role of the buses is to remind us all about the drink / drive dangers, take some of the offenders off the road and try to keep the rest of us safe on the roads.

Having been with a booze bus operation for a night, it's a function that is required, the message still isn't getting through, despite the TV ad's and the publicity. The worst aspect is that a drunk driver may hit you or your loved ones. Getting the drink drivers to change their habits is going to be a long hard slog.

Manning the booze buses is perceived by the public to be close to being public enemy number one, yet the team we spent the evening with were professional and conducted themselves with good humour and grace.

Well done to them.

[Our thanks to Supt. John Kelly, Sgt. Jamie Dempsey and the team at the Waitakere Alcohol Unit.]