

Cadets try to make the grade

State police train Illinois' finest in law enforcement

By **Jennifer Wig**
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SPRINGFIELD — You've seen their "cherries" flashing in your rearview mirror.

Perhaps shamefully, perhaps angrily, you've handed over your driver's license and insurance card after they said you were clocked at 15 mph over the speed limit.

Meet "Smokey the Bear," a highly trained Illinois State Police, or ISP, trooper who contends daily with lead-footed drivers, belligerent drunks — and the constant danger of being injured or killed.

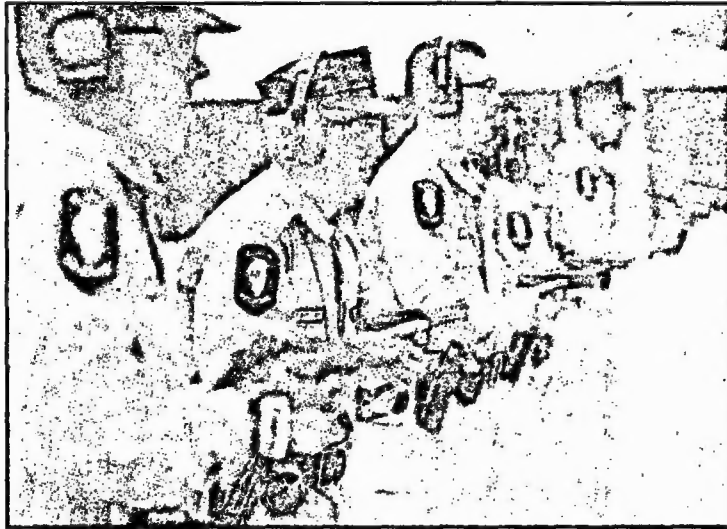
To be accepted into the Illinois State Police Academy requires a bachelor's degree or an associate's degree plus three years of law enforcement experience. But to earn a trooper's coveted six-pointed star, cadets must become proficient in everything from driving an automobile backward to using firearms.

Training takes place Monday through Friday, allowing cadets to return home Friday evening for the weekend. Although the academy is similar in many ways to a military boot camp, Parks said much of the physical training is less strenuous and ISP focuses more on keeping only dedicated cadets.

"Here the emphasis is put on your individual effort," Parks said. "This training takes more self-discipline."

The 26-week program is definitely not for the faint of heart. Cadet Class 107's 45 members began their training Jan. 4. Two weeks into the regimen, six cadets already had quit.

At 8 a.m. they march from their dorms to the gymnasium for drill. In the beginning, lining up for drill is neither swift nor smooth. Each day a different



Carlos T. Miranda/HERALD & REVIEW

Cadet Leonard Kirkpatrick, second from left, a former Coles County correctional officer, learns marksmanship training with his fellow officers at the Illinois State Police academy.

cadet is chosen to align the four rows, inching fellow cadets forward or back.

Today's "volunteer," Cadet Terry Gooden, of Centralia, seems a bit nervous. Drill instructor Sgt. Chris Tracy observes this and peppers Gooden with questions to test his mettle. Unnerved, Gooden is having trouble adjusting the third squad into a straight line.

"Are you just going through the motions?" Tracy bellows.

When everyone is finally lined up, the Teaching Assessing Correcting, or TAC, officers keep them at attention for a few minutes. TAC officers constantly monitor and comment on cadets' progress. Tracy directs the group to march, chivvying along cadets not keeping the proper alignment and relating it to future job requirements.

Training also includes learning the proper traffic stop.

The police officer in the video steps out of his squad car and approaches the vehicle in front of him. Instead of producing his license, the motorist pulls out a gun. Cadets watching the video frown as the cop is shot, falling to the ground as the speeder pulls away.

"You don't know who you're stopping," says special agent Steve Lyddon. "To you, it's just a speeder. But that person could've just murdered their whole family. Or maybe they're just late to court."

Although learning the steps, stance and lingo of a traffic stop seem easy in the classroom, when cadets step outside to try it they are anxious. They forget their lines and focus more on their stance than thinking ahead.

Of course, cadets also learn to use their weapons.

It's not just about the bulls-eye at the Pawnee outdoor firearm training facility. Trooper Will Rogers gives instructions and blows a whistle, prompting cadets to pull their 40-caliber Glock model 22 handguns from their holsters and begin firing. Cadets wear ear protection, making the bullets sound like distant hollow firecrackers.

After one week of firearms training they must pass a qualifications exam. A passing score is 75 percent of shots fired within the box on the target. If they do not pass, cadets are allowed to spend individual remedial time with a teacher for 10 hours before retaking the exam. Another fail-

ure and they're out of the program.

They also learn to drive.

Cadets drive a standard Crown Victoria squad car through a series of cones set up in formation that mimic a high-speed chase through a narrow alley. They practice parking in tight spaces, reversing direction at a high speed and circling tight corners.

Sgt. Darrin Cummings, a driving instructor, says most cadets have never driven a full-sized vehicle. Crown Vics are large, and the first day of Emergency Vehicle Operation Course, or EVOC, training consists of basic maneuvers.

"We stress not using mirrors, but turning and looking where you want the car to go," Cummings says. "We call it the bread and butter of the department. You have to drive a squad car every day."

Daily training at the academy continues until 5 p.m., when cadets begin an hour of exercise. Then the hours after dinner are their own.

Graduation day is June 2. Most cadets who have made it to March will finish the training. But they still have much to learn, including the laws of arrest, search and seizure. They'll gain interviewing and communication skills, practice field sobriety tests and study crash investigation techniques.

Commander Carl Weitzel, who runs the academy, calls the six months of training "a holistic challenge," but not strenuous.

"The degree to which they are forced to do things they haven't done before — strenuous physical activity or intense educational challenges, firearms handling and the realization that not everybody may be happy to see them — all contribute to personal challenges," he said. "The degree to which it is stressful, of course, is up to the individual and that's something we teach here."