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U.S. NEWS

'That way — go, go!' Uber driver's ride becomes impromptu police cruiser after it's commandeered during Houston manhunt

"This is by far the craziest thing I've ever experienced," Anthony Baines said. "I really didn't know what to do other than just help."

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— Anthony Baines, an Uber driver, had completed 15 rides before he joined the police pursuit around 12:30 a.m. Aug. 8. Courtesy Anthony Baines

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By Shayna Jacobs

Well, give him five stars for stellar service.

An Uber driver in Houston was one block from his pickup two weeks ago when a pair of police officers commandeered his 2020 Nissan Pathfinder and ordered him to chase a shirtless, barefoot suspect on the run.

Anthony Baines, an Army veteran, said his instincts for public service – and a jolt of adrenaline – kicked in when the officers jumped into his vehicle and told him to follow the suspect they were pursuing Aug. 8.

Moments earlier, Baines had watched the barely dressed person sprint past his car in Houston's Heights neighborhood.

Police told [NBC affiliate KPRC](#) that the suspect had threatened to shoot a woman and her children. He hadn't been found, according to KPRC.

Baines had completed 15 rides before he joined the pursuit around 12:30 a.m.

"Give me a ride over there, please!" a female officer said as she jumped into the front passenger seat. "That way – go, go!"

Baines, 39, who served a year in Iraq and spent eight years in the Army as a mechanic on Apache helicopters, said he had never experienced anything like it in his two years driving for Uber.

"This is by far the craziest thing I've ever experienced," he said.

Houston police and Uber didn't respond to requests for comment. In a statement, Douglas Griffith, president of the Houston Police Officers' Union, thanked Baines for his help.

Baines "could have said no, but instead jumped into action helping our officers," the statement said.

"In a day where many are so quick to video, but refuse to help, it is refreshing to see a citizen step up and help our officers. He placed himself in harm's way to help and it is appreciated!" the statement continued.

Baines, a married father of two boys, ages 6 and 2, said there wasn't much time to think about how to respond to the officer's strange request.

"I had adrenaline rushing," he said. "I really didn't know what to do other than just help."

Legal experts who reviewed the situation had varying takes on whether the officers' actions were legally grounded.

Loyola Law School professor Jessica Levinson said that, in general, a person can refuse to assist police in a chase if asked. A Texas law granting police the authority to summon assistance from residents of their county could have applied, but it was unclear whether it did, she said.

"If Texas' law doesn't apply or isn't enforced – two big ifs – then it appears that legally a driver could refuse," Levinson said.

She added that many people might not have known their rights in that scenario.

"Not everyone may know when they are free to refuse," Levinson said. "When police get in your car and yell 'go,' that likely can feel mandatory."

Baines said that he didn't know what rights he had in the moment, but he was ultimately glad he got involved – even though, by his own admission, he'd put himself in danger, a fact his wife was none too thrilled about when she heard.

"If there was any way I can help out to protect anybody that was in harm's way, I would do it over," Baines said. "I probably would have done it again."

Legally murky

Houston criminal defense attorney Jed Silverman said the officers' decision to involve Baines in the chase could have triggered a number of legal complications.

Had an arrest been made, Baines could have been dragged into litigation over admissibility of evidence because he was acting at the direction of police, according to Silverman.

Had someone been hurt during the pursuit, Baines might have been civilly liable for injuries.

"It all seems entertaining and creative ... but there's problems in doing that," Silverman said. "In commandeering an Uber and having [Baines] participate in the pursuit of somebody, it creates

problems from an evidentiary perspective, and it opens up the Uber driver to civil liability if something happens in the course of doing this.”

Silverman said the officers should have exercised better judgment, because “100 things could have gone wrong.”

“You’re taking a civilian and putting them in a dangerous situation,” Silverman said. “I promise you the police officer was not trained to do that.”

David Kwok, director of the Criminal Justice Institute at the University of Houston Law Center, said Baines didn’t have much of a choice because the officers would have been able to argue that there were exigent circumstances to take such unusual actions.

“Sometimes there are exigencies and emergencies that courts say that is sufficient to justify what would otherwise be trampling on someone’s rights,” Kwok said.

He added that “the understandable thing to do would just be follow the police instructions at the time.”

“And if something seems wrong later, you can speak to an attorney and go to court, but what realistic remedy would you have?” Kwok added.

After he stopped to pick up the officer’s partner, Baines said, he drove both around for several minutes, circling a roughly 2-mile area before he dropped them at a muster point where other officers had gathered to regroup.

He then headed back to pick up the passenger who was still waiting for him outside the house — a rider who had been tracking his bizarre detour the whole time on the Uber app.

“He was very understanding, very patient and very considerate of the fact that I’d just experienced a very unique situation,” Baines said, noting that the passenger also saw police helicopters and a swarm of emergency vehicles flooding his neighborhood.

“He was going to a bar,” Baines said. “I probably should have joined him.”

Shayna Jacobs

Shayna Jacobs is a national reporter for NBC News digital.
