

# An Eventful

By Lt. *Brien Croteau*

**M**y most memorable car ride took place one Sunday afternoon on a lonely stretch of I-10. I was returning from my parents' house in Tallahassee, Fla., to Pensacola, where I was stationed at Sherman Field. I had been on the road about an hour when the rain began to come down in earnest.

I had seen many rainstorms before, but this one was heavy. Visibility was so bad I slowed down to 20 mph, hoping I would have time to stop if I saw brake lights ahead. The deluge lasted only a few minutes, and, while the skies still looked threatening, visibility was good, so I sped back up to highway speeds—about 60 mph.

I really liked my truck. A 4x4 crew-cab

pickup, it was the first new vehicle I ever had bought. I had been looking forward to getting to take it off road, though I never thought that chance would come in the next few moments. I hadn't noticed the standing water in the ruts worn in the road.

My first sign of trouble came when the back end of my truck suddenly slid out from under me. My heart beat faster as I realized I had no control over the vehicle. The truck began to drift to the left; then, I saw a median looming ahead, and I panicked at the thought of flying into oncoming traffic. I turned the steering wheel to the right, but that move had no effect on where I was pointing.

I remember lightly tapping the brakes,

# Trip Home

which started the truck spinning clockwise. I was relieved I was heading toward the right now. A witness said I spun five or six times before leaving the roadway, at which point my tires dug into the soft grass on the shoulder. The truck subsequently flipped two-and-a-half times before coming to rest on the roof of the cab, only 6 feet from a tree line.

While the truck had been spinning, it felt as if time was slowing down. I remember thinking, “This is it; this is how I’m going to die.” The centrifugal motion had forced my body toward the center, and I later saw how the left portion of the roof had been crushed a foot inward on landing. I only can imagine how badly my head would have been crushed if I had remained in the driver area.

When all motion had stopped, I was amazed not to feel any pain. I had an adrenaline rush as I undid my safety belt and fell to the roof. I then climbed out of the shattered window and was relieved to see a good Samaritan running to help me. As I sat on the ground, my whole body shook. I looked back to the remains of my truck and noticed the tires still were spinning.

Within 15 minutes, a highway-patrol officer, fire truck, ambulance, and tow truck had arrived. I sat in the patrol car while he called my parents to let them know I was all right and needed a ride. I met them at a restaurant off the next exit ramp, and we drove to the auto-shop parking lot so I could grab the personal effects from my truck. It was strange seeing the twisted frame; I felt lucky to be alive.

I learned many lessons from this experience. First, I realized I was driving too fast for

the conditions, even though I wasn’t exceeding the speed limit. As the state trooper reminded me, the posted speed limit assumes the best weather and road conditions. I should have slowed to reflect the hazards.

Next, although my truck was a great vehicle around town, it handled quite differently on the highway at faster speeds. With nothing in its bed on the day of my accident, the pickup wasn’t the best highway cruiser. That factor figured into the next vehicle I bought—one equipped with full-time all-wheel drive, a stability protection system, and six airbags.

Finally, I learned I could believe what I always had heard about how to drive over ice or when skidding. I knew you were supposed to keep the steering wheel straight or to steer slightly into the slide. I also had heard the brakes wouldn’t be effective without traction. Knowing these things is what caused me to panic when I realized my truck was out of control.

In the past year, I have attended a safety driving school that gave me a new appreciation for my own driving skills. I also feel more comfortable if an unexpected situation develops while I’m at the wheel. I highly recommend a safety driving school to everyone; it’s money well spent. Besides, most insurance companies will discount your premium if you have attended a certified school.

I was lucky; my accident only cost me my vehicle. I just hope my lessons learned can prevent someone else from having a similar misfortune. 

Lt. Croteau flies with VAQ-139.