

One Bad Decision Can

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Marine Sgt. Marianne L. Knight (formerly Davenport) graduated sixth in her series at boot camp with a Meritorious Mast. She hit the ground running when she graduated from Military Occupational School as a military-police officer. Shortly after arriving at Marine Corps Air Station, El Toro, she was awarded a Navy Achievement Medal.

Everything then, however, changed for this hard-working and ambitious Marine. It started with a bad decision one hot evening in November 1998, when then-LCpl. Davenport decided to go out after work and blow off some steam with fellow Marines at a local tavern. She consumed six or seven beers on an empty stomach, left the tavern about 10 p.m., and slid behind the wheel of her 1985 Ford Mustang 5.0. She then started a 1.5-mile journey that “temporarily” would end her life.

While driving more than 100 mph without her seat belt on and with a BAC of .17, Marianne ran a red light and slammed broadside into a Chevy Suburban that, in turn, careened into another Ford. According to the police reports, there were no skid marks at the scene, which would indicate she never touched her brakes.

Here’s what most likely happened next, as compiled during a crash assessment by Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD):

- At .10 seconds, the front bumper and the grill collapsed.
- At .20 seconds, the hood crumpled as it rose into the air, with the rear wheels still spinning. The front quarter panels hit the doors with so much force that the rear of the car came forward and met parts already rippling backward. Marianne’s body lurched forward at 20 times the force of gravity, with a weight equivalent of 3,000 pounds. Her right arm rammed into the dashboard as the engine broke into the driver’s compartment, dislocating her hip and smashing into her right knee.

- At .30 seconds, her body continued forward. Her chest thrust toward the steering column, and her head neared the sun visor.

- At .40 seconds, the front of the car collapsed entirely. The rear of the car, however, as well as Marianne’s body, continued forward.



Leave Lasting Scars

- At .50 seconds, her chest slammed into the steering wheel with enough force to bruise her heart, to break ribs, and to collapse her esophagus.

- At .60 seconds, Marianne's face smashed through the windshield, scalping her forehead from just above her eyebrow to the top of her head. The force caused her brain to swell. Meanwhile, the rear of the car completed its forward movement and fell to the ground.

- At .70 seconds, all forward velocity had stopped, and her body settled back into the heap of twisted metal. Her scalped skin returned to its previous location.

Emergency-medical technicians removed Marianne from the wreckage and loaded her into an ambulance, where they feverishly worked over her. For five long minutes during their treatment, her heart stopped beating.

Marianne spent four days in a hospital with swelling of the brain. She also was covered with lacerations and had two broken ribs, a broken wrist, a bruised heart, a dislocated hip, torn knee ligaments, and permanent scars on the front of her legs. Surgeons used 355 stitches inside and out to repair the damage. Her scabs took more than six weeks to heal. Her hair grew back, though thinner on top than it once was, and she styles it to cover the miraculously faint scars on her forehead.

Physical injuries, however, were only the beginning of the ramifications Marianne had to deal with as a result of her bad decision that November night. The young man in the Chevy Suburban had a promising college-sports career ahead of him. Now, he's sidelined forever because of the injuries he sustained. As if the guilt of what she did to a complete stranger wasn't enough, she also had to deal with the effects her bad decision had on her family.

Marianne is the primary custodian of two young daughters. Because of her injuries, they had to live with family until she recovered enough to care for them. She missed a year of their lives.

After a police officer read the Miranda rights to Marianne that night in the hospital bed, he took her driver's license, and the state of California suspended it for one year. She eventually was convicted of misdemeanor driving under the influence, with injuries. She received three years of probation, spent five days in an Orange County jail, and was assigned 160 hours of community service. She also paid \$1,350 in fines, besides her attorney's fees.



The windshield scalped Marianne's forehead from her eyebrow to the top of her head.

The costs didn't stop there, either. She was required to attend a six-month, drunk-driving-education program that cost her \$700. The court also ordered her to attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings for the duration of that program. She further was admitted into a one-month, military, substance-abuse program as an inpatient.

Finally, Marianne was relieved of her duties as a military-police officer and, at the recommendation of her superiors, was being processed out of the Marine Corps. Because she's a survivor, though, she picked up the tattered pieces of her life and started rebuilding a promising future in the Marine Corps.

Although most drunk drivers are forced out of the Marine Corps, Marianne got a second chance. The higher levels in her chain of command looked at the whole Marine. They didn't judge her on just the one error in judgment but on her merit before and after the incident. 🌟

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