



I Am Lucky To Be Alive...

Photo by Dan Steber. Modified.

By April Phillips

Sometimes, it's the small things that make all the difference. For GM1(SW) James Isaak, a Minot, N.D., native stationed at the Navy Munitions Command Detachment Sewells Point in Norfolk, the things that make life worth living are his new wife and the home they are making together. They dream of having a baby someday soon.

Although Isaak is only 24 years old, he's had a very successful career so far. Enlisting in the Navy right out of high school, he attained the rank of first class petty officer in less than five years. Because he treasures his personal and professional success so much, he's acutely aware that he nearly threw it all away four years ago.

"I'm really lucky to be alive," he admitted.

Four years ago, after returning from a two-month at-sea period, Isaak decided to buy a motorcycle.

"I loved sport bikes, but I had no riding experience," he

said. "I had no license, but at the dealership, they told me if I could come up with the money to buy it, I could drive it off the lot."

Since he'd recently spent time at sea, Isaak had a little money in his pocket. He was able to obtain a loan for the rest and purchased a Honda CBR 600. A friend taught him some of the basics of motorcycle operation, and he began riding around in parking lots, trying to get acclimated.

"Then I started to get bold," he admitted.

Isaak took the bike out on the street and his speed

began to creep up. After stalling out at a traffic light, the bike went down, and he busted the rearview mirror and cracked the headlight.

"They always say that you'll put the bike down once, and I figured I'd gotten it out of the way," Isaak said.

In four months, he'd put a couple of hundred miles on the bike. He also dropped the motorcycle one more time and still hadn't taken the Motorcycle Safety Foundation's Basic *RiderCourse*. However, he was feeling more confident and itching to see how fast his bike could go.

"I wanted to go riding with the guys. I remember I was sitting at a gas station in Virginia Beach, and a bunch of experienced riders rode by," he said.

They stopped and asked if he wanted to tag along.

"I wanted to be that guy. I wanted to do the things they were doing. They were doing stunts and other cool-looking things. I decided to give it a try, but they started speeding up. I was nervous, but I wanted to look cool so I tried to keep up," Isaak said.

He soon realized that he didn't have the skills to be riding with these people, but his pride wouldn't let him slow down and break off from the group. Isaak admits that peer pressure led him to take some risks that he wouldn't have on his own.

"We went really fast through tight, narrow curves. Then I saw the trees coming at me and slammed on the brakes. I got bucked off my bike just like a horse," he said.

It might sound like a cliché, but Isaak said he really did see his life flashing before his eyes. He was lucky that there were no oncoming cars. He ended up with little more than a few bruises and some scratches. He was wearing all the proper personal protective equipment and credits this with saving his life. However, all the PPE in the world doesn't help an inexperienced rider make solid decisions in a split second. Isaak knows his crash could have been avoided if he hadn't pushed the limits beyond his skill level.

"Those statistics you see – I could easily have been the one who died," he said, his voice cracking with emotion. "I got married last year, and my wife and I are buying a house. We're thinking of having a kid. I could have lost all that with one stupid mistake, but this is my second chance."

Isaak feels like a man with a new lease on life. He's determined to make the most of his second chance. He has some advice for others who see the sport bike groups on the roadways and think they can do the same stunts at the same speeds.

"Get the training. Think before you do it, and most importantly, be real with yourself." ■



Cartoon by Ricardo Nunes.

Motorcycling:
Maximum fun requires
maximum preparation.
Hone your skills.