

summoned help, and was flown to a hospital. Doctors described her injuries as moderate.

As reported by the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA), seat belts have prevented 135,000 fatalities and 3.8 million injuries in the past 26 years, thus saving \$585 billion in medical and other costs. If all vehicle occupants had used seat belts during that period, nearly 315,000 deaths and 5.2 million injuries could have been prevented, at a cost savings of \$913 billion.

Figures like these, coupled with the fact that motor-vehicle crashes still are the leading cause of death among military personnel [65 percent of Sailors and 46 percent of Marines in FY04], forced Navy commands around the world to take action in May 2004. They partnered with the NHTSA and National Safety Council in the “Click It or Ticket” national enforcement campaign aimed at seat-belt violators. This campaign ran throughout the critical days of summer 2004. ■

But for a Seat Belt...



A Navy lieutenant was elated to be home for the 2003 holidays after spending nearly two years in harm’s way aboard a ship that had been in and out of the Persian Gulf more times than his mother wanted to know. To commemorate his return, his family had planned a special reunion in Las Vegas.

All was going according to plan. The lieutenant had arrived at the airport, where his fiancée

met him. His parents and favorite aunt and uncle were waiting for them at a casino in Las Vegas. And, topping off the reunion was a special gift for his mom: rare concert tickets to a performance by Canadian diva Celine Dion.

Unfortunately, tragedy would steal the show. The lieutenant was so excited he forgot to fasten his seat belt after stopping for gas just outside Las Vegas. Then came sudden brake lights, and the

SUV the lieutenant was driving veered and rolled across the highway. After having survived nearly two years of continuous overseas duty, the 30-year-old lieutenant was thrown from the vehicle and died instantly—just five minutes away from the reunion. His fiancée, who was wearing a seat belt, suffered a broken nose and bruises.

As advertised in a July 2004 press release from the National Safety Council, “Strong state seat-belt laws still are the best way to save lives.” That press release was issued to highlight the 20th anniversary of a watershed year for highway safety. In 1984, a key federal rule was implemented that led to air

Motor-vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for the military, outweighing other causes, including training mishaps and combat. Sixty-five percent of FY04 Navy fatalities were related to private motor vehicles, according to Naval Safety Center data.

“While we are doing everything we can to protect families from unpredictable threats, we must continue to address the most predictable and leading risks our families and military face every day—traffic mishaps,” said Capt. Bruce Crisler, then-director of the shore safety programs at the Safety Center.

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bags in vehicles. The same year saw the first state seat-belt law enacted, and a federal law was signed, resulting in national implementation of a 21-year-old drinking age. New data estimates that 190,000 fewer traffic deaths have occurred since those landmark measures became effective.

According to a study by the National Safety Council, states that have enacted primary seat-belt laws since 1995 experienced, on average, a 15-percent increase in belt use. Seat belts are proven to reduce the risk of serious injury or death in a crash by 45 percent in passenger cars and 60 percent in light trucks. The study shows that 12,177 lives were lost between 1995 and 2002 because 30 states had failed to enact strong seat-belt-use laws.

As noted in a message to Navy flag officers, RAdm. Dick Brooks, the Naval Safety Center commander, said, “We are still experiencing far too many casualties from these kinds of mishaps. It’s not just about numbers or meeting some numerical goal, it’s about preserving the most precious resource we have—our human resource.”

The 2004 “Click It or Ticket” campaign, which the Navy participated in, relied on periods of intense enforcement of seat-belt laws, coupled with aggressive advertising and media outreach, to let people know about the effort. For many drivers who don’t wear seat belts, research has shown that the threat of a ticket is a greater inducement to buckle up than the threat of injury or death. However, it’s not just about writing tickets—it’s about changing the behavior of would-be violators who currently don’t buckle up.

It’s also about reminding people—like the Navy lieutenant mentioned in the beginning of this article—that they must stay focused on situational awareness at all times. In his excitement, he forgot to buckle up one time, and he paid for the mistake with his life. These words of his mother say it best, “I was so afraid for him the whole time all this war bit was going on. Never would I think he would come home and be in this senseless accident.” ■

