

Wear Your Seat Belt Because



By Cdr. Brad Kidwell
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With 14 years in the Navy and 4,000 hours of flying E-2 Hawkeyes, I've been around the block a few times and have learned a few things about surviving in what seems like a dangerous environment. But I won't bore you with flight-related sea stories here—I'll save that for another time and place.

Instead, this story is about survival in the most dangerous environment and how a simple habit can

save your life. It's about driving down the highway and wearing a seat belt. On Easter Sunday 2000, I may have gotten a second chance at life because I was wearing my seat belt.

The day started out pleasant enough: My girlfriend (Lizann) and I got up early and drove to her aunt's house in the Oakland Hills, overlooking San Francisco Bay. We enjoyed a large, Italian-style brunch with her extended family (lots of people). It was a

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You Never Know

sunny, spring day, and everyone was having a good time—definitely the stuff that conjures up fond memories.

Late in the afternoon, we said goodbye, got in Lizann's car, fastened our seat belts, and set off on the three-hour drive back to Monterey. We were hoping to beat the Northern-to-Southern California weekend-commute traffic—but didn't.

South of San Jose on U.S. Highway 101 lies a treacherous spot where four lanes narrow down to two. What makes it so treacherous is that a bottleneck occurs where the highway curves around some foothills, and approaching, high-speed drivers can't see the traffic jams until they come around the bend. Lizann and I got caught in such a situation.

As I came around the curve, traffic had slowed down because of the bottleneck and a fender bender that had occurred. I slowed down to the same rate as the traffic around me while stealing a glance at Lizann, who was asleep but safely buckled in. We nearly were stopped when the SUV driver behind me suddenly gunned his engine and darted into the lane on our right. His action drew my attention to our right rear quarter just in time to see what had prompted such a drastic move. Another car was coming, and he simply was getting out of the way.

Lizann and I took the full impact. In the next millisecond, I heard the deafening crunch of metal and screeching tires and felt my head hitting the roof of Lizann's Toyota Corolla, even though I was wearing my seat belt. We sailed, spun and careened off three other cars before slamming into the center median—none of which I remember. I read it in the CHiP accident report. A Lincoln Continental traveling 80 mph had rammed unimpeded into the back of our Toyota going 20 mph. The driver was just some guy not paying attention as he came around the curve.

Later, after our car had stopped against the median, I remember having a ringing in my ears. I also had

tunnel vision (yes, it's real), and I vaguely was aware of what just had happened to us. People already had surrounded our car, had turned off the ignition and set the brake, and were asking if we were OK. It took a long time for paramedics and the CHiP to get through the traffic.

Meanwhile, broken windshield glass covered us, and we had minor cuts and scrapes. Debris was scattered everywhere, including Lizann's high-heeled shoes with torn leather straps, which attests to the violence of the impact. Looking around, though, I realized we both were whole, we still were strapped in, and we didn't appear to have any broken bones. I had a headache that a 10-pound Excedrin couldn't cure, and Lizann's back was hurting, but that was the worst of our problems. Once the shock and adrenaline subsided, we both realized how lucky we had been.

As the CHiP, fire crew, and EMS personnel arrived on the scene, they took turns looking us over and checking out our 25 percent shorter Toyota Corolla—the trunk now was in the back seat. They echoed our thoughts about how lucky we were to be in such good shape.

The car ended up a total loss. I had a mild concussion, and Lizann had a sore back for about a week. Neither of us had any permanent injuries. The other guy was OK, too—he had the physical advantage of mass (the bigger car wins), plus his airbag deployed as it should in front-end collisions.

The only lasting effect for me was that I'm no longer just disciplined about wearing my seat belt when I'm in a car—I'm religious about it. I preach it to everyone I know who needs to hear it. If you're one who thinks you don't need to wear a seat belt because you're a good driver, I urge you to think again. I think I'm a good driver, too, but I met a bad one. ■

Cdr. Kidwell was a student at the Navy Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif., at the time of this crash.