

# When You Take the Keys, Take *All* the Keys

By Cdr. Stu Alexander

**I**t was Columbus Day weekend, which meant a well-deserved three-day weekend for the command. The Florida fall-weather forecast was great, and everyone was excited to have the extra time to spend with family and friends.

I had been on board [*as OinC*] fewer than two weeks and had made it clear in that short period of time that safety was at the top of my list. Through a Captain's Call, a lengthy meeting with the CPO mess, and division meetings, I had put out the word that my primary concern was the well-being of all our Sailors—both on and off duty. I didn't know my biggest leadership challenge would come 11 days after reporting, and I wouldn't be able to catch my breath again until I had briefed this mishap to 800 of my shipmates, my commodore, and a VTC with a two-star present.

About 1600, Oct. 10, after working duty-section weekend, a 33-year-old Sailor was home having a party and drinking with some friends. The get-together lasted until 7 p.m., when the Sailor said he wanted to go to a club. His girlfriend, knowing he had been drinking, had the presence of mind to take his car keys as a preventive measure. This gesture angered the Sailor and led to a heated argument that escalated to the point where the Sailor's roommate checked to see what the commotion was all about. The Sailor and his girlfriend subsequently cooled off, and the roommate said he would drive the Sailor to the club if he just would give him a thumbs-up when he was ready. The Sailor agreed, and the roommate returned to his room.

Unfortunately, the Sailor also owned a motorcycle, and he still had those keys. Later that evening, around 2100, he decided to leave the house without telling anyone. He quietly pushed his motorcycle out of the garage and into the street, closed the garage door, and slipped away unnoticed. Three hours later, he was dead. No one yet knows his whereabouts for those three hours.

The police accident report read that, at approximately 2345, the Sailor was traveling north at a high

rate of speed, apparently on the way home, when he lost control in a turn. He departed the northbound lane and hit the southbound curb. The motorcycle then smacked a guardrail, ejecting the Sailor. A witness said he saw the motorcycle lying on the sidewalk and stopped to investigate. He found the Sailor nearby in the grass and contacted emergency-rescue personnel. They pronounced the Sailor dead at the scene.

When this senseless death occurred, my command was 100 percent ORM complete and 100 percent drive-safe complete. Supervisors also had delivered monthly safety training to all divisions. In July, before my arrival, the command had completed a safety stand-down, covering many topics, including traffic safety and DUI lectures from the local sheriff's office and state highway patrol. The command further just had been complimented on a superlative NavOSH safety inspection. It seemed like all hands were doing everything they could to spread the word. In the days and weeks that followed this fatal wreck, though, many were walking around saying, "If only I had..."

Use our example at your next divisional quarters and ask, "What could you have done?" Note the responses you get. **S**

*The author was OinC, NAS Jacksonville AIMD, when he wrote this article.*

## Resources:

- Rolling Stoned: Experiments in Riding Drunk, [http://www.motorcyclecruiser.com/streetsurvival/riding\\_drunk/index.html](http://www.motorcyclecruiser.com/streetsurvival/riding_drunk/index.html)
- Alcohol-Impaired Motorcyclists: Communications and Outreach, <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/airbags/Countermeasures/pages/Chapt5/3p2AcIImpComm.htm>
- Trends in Motorcycle Fatalities Associated With Alcohol-Impaired Driving—United States, 1983-2003, <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5347a2.htm>