

An Ounce of Prevention

By Lt. Scott Myers

The lesson of this saying is well practiced in the naval-aviation community. We start each day by walking our airfields and ships, picking up every piece of FOD that a gas-turbine engine possibly could ingest. While our mechanics are checking and double-checking our aircraft, the pilots start the preflight brief by conducting an ORM check. This check is designed to find out if everyone's head is in the game and if they're ready to climb into the aircraft.

The crew then does a preflight brief, in which we talk about what we'll do for specific emergencies or situations we might encounter during the flight. After checking the maintenance records for the aircraft, we do a preflight check on our personal life-support gear. We check our radios, first-aid kit, flares, smokes, alternate air source, personal flotation collar—everything that will keep us alive and aid in our rescue, should the situation demand it. Then we walk to the aircraft and complete a very detailed preflight inspection of the aircraft before departing on our mission.

This same philosophy should hold true when it comes to riding motorcycles. When Sailors and Marines mount their mighty two-wheeled machines, they need



to do more than just kick the tires and make sure the gas tank is full. Like an aircraft, the motorcycle needs to be checked to make sure it will perform as expected, and the rider needs to be equipped with the proper life-support gear.

In five years of riding motorcycles, I never had had to test my protective motorcycle gear, which includes helmet; gloves; a ballistic, nylon, motorcycle jacket with integrated pads; and leather, steel-toed boots. My first practical test, however unplanned, came the evening of July 19, 2004.

I was riding my Honda RC-51 motorcycle home from Mayport Naval Station. As typically occurs in North Florida during the summer, a storm had passed through at some point in the day. The ground still looked a little damp, and the skies remained overcast. Traffic was heavy on the Dames Point bridge, a large bridge that crosses the St. Johns River. I changed to the right lane and decelerated as I started up the main section of the bridge.

About two seconds after I had changed lanes (I was riding the left-hand side of the right lane behind a large truck, trying not to get too far left because traffic was passing), I saw that a large portion of the right lane was eroded and full of water. I had no choice but to stay where I was because traffic was passing me to the left. If I tried to switch to the right-hand median, I would travel through the eroded part anyway and angle toward a concrete wall bordering the bridge span.

I depressed both front and rear brakes for about a second and released them just before I hit the eroded part of the lane. I immediately felt the bike dip down, then pitch up before it came out from under me. I landed on the road, flat on my chest, and started a spinning slide on my chest and side. I could see peripherally that the traffic all around me had started to open up, giving me some room. I watched my bike sliding on its side on the road behind me, moving about the same speed as me. I remember thinking about what fairings I would have to replace on the bike.

As I slowed down, I used my hands to control my spinning and leaned to the right, which seemed to help me move to the right side of the

lane, then into the right-hand median. I came to a stop on my chest, did a quick physical assessment, stood up, and walked about 50 feet to my bike. Traffic in the right and center lanes was completely stopped about 10 feet away from my bike. Drivers were out of their cars, standing with their mouths open and looking astonished that I was up and walking.

One guy asked if I was OK, and I gave him a quick thumbs up. Then I grabbed and righted my bike. The guy who had asked if I was OK handed me my tank bag, which had come off my fuel tank. I put the tank bag back on the bike, slipped the bike into neutral, and walked it to the right-hand median. Traffic started to move once I was clear of the roadway, except for a couple of cars that stayed parked in the right lane; those people wanted to make sure I really was OK.

When I got my bike restarted, I did a slow taxi-test in the right-hand median to ensure it was rideable. Once I knew the bike was OK, I drove it home at a relatively slow speed, intently watching for any more potholes in the road. I called the sheriff's office from home and told them about the roadway-erosion problem I had encountered. The woman I talked to said they would take care of the matter. I then told my wife about my exciting experience, ate dinner, called my insurance company, worked out, got a good night's rest, and stood squadron duty the next day.

You might be thinking I got a lucky break. Not too many people have their motorcycles ripped out from under them at 65 mph, in heavy traffic, and escape without a scratch. If I were asked to quantify it, I would say it was 70 percent good preparation and 30 percent things that just worked out in my favor. I was driving defensively at the time and wearing the proper PPE. These factors significantly contributed to my being able to enjoy dinner with my wife that night, meet my service obligations the next day, and save my wife and I a lot of physical and emotional pain. The same factors also enabled me to recount my experience in this forum. The bottom line here is that there is no substitute for good preparation. 

Lt. Myers flies with HSL-46.