

through the passenger window, which was lowered at the time. The passenger compartment remained intact; his injuries primarily were the result of being ejected and striking an immovable object.

The PO1 had been out that evening with his parents and later with some friends. Authorities didn't do a BAC analysis, but the friends said they hadn't seen him drinking when they were with him, and he didn't appear drunk. However, he had left a girl before the mishap occurred. Their discussion, which concerned the future of their relationship, had been somewhat emotional. The PO1's father said that, according to the girl, his son was upset but not suicidal or distraught.

The mishap report listed three root causes of the PO1's crash, which happened just one mile from his parents' home:

- Failure to stop at a train crossing, even when the barrier was lowered;
- Failure to wear a seat belt, resulting in ejection from the vehicle; and
- Possible use of alcohol, resulting in impaired judgment.

The report also suggested that a misguided sense of "freedom" after completing his naval obligation could have led the PO1 to do what he did.

The CO of the victim's ship has spoken with his crew several times since this mishap, primarily to keep them posted on the PO1's progress, but also to remind them of the dangers present when they make poor decisions. The CO has vowed to keep stressing the importance of obeying traffic laws to all hands, including the mandatory use of seat belts and the senseless dangers that can result from driving impaired or using poor judgment. ■

As reported by Operation Lifesaver and the U.S. Department of Transportation, 3,077 high-way-rail collisions occurred in 2002, the most recent year for which final statistics are available. Crossing fatalities that year numbered 356, with 998 injuries reported. The top 15 states in 2002 for crossing incidents also were the states where 67 percent of the fatalities occurred. Those states included Texas, Illinois, California, Indiana, Louisiana, Ohio, Georgia, Florida, Iowa, Wisconsin, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Michigan, and Arkansas. The setting for the preceding article was one of those 15 states.

A Matter of D

By JO3 Camy Thompson,
USS *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN-71)

“I was heading east on Interstate 64, just before the Chesapeake Boulevard exit, when I lost control of my car. I remember sliding, and the car then flipped over. I reached for my cell phone to dial 911—that’s when I realized my legs were on fire. I just dropped the phone and started to scream.”

That’s how a young Navy woman described her car crash in the early morning hours of Nov. 16.

A pastor who was on the highway that night and witnessed the event said, “We saw a fast-moving car traveling the same direction as us, and, as we went around a bend, the car just hit the wall and started spinning. It then flipped over the divider before coming to rest in the HOV lane.

“I ran across the road and saw that the car was on fire and that all the glass still was intact. By now, another passerby had yelled for me to get a bar and break a window so I could rescue the occupant. I ran back to my car and pulled a hammer from my toolbox.

“When I returned, I heard cries, ‘I’m burning, I’m burning!’ coming from the overturned vehicle. I jumped down over the wall and grabbed the two arms that were reaching out the window.”

About this time, a second man jumped in to help the pastor pull out the occupant. Just as they had freed her from the car, its gas tank exploded, throwing both men and the young Navy woman backward. The two men quickly got back to their feet and pulled her away from the burning vehicle.

“Once we were a safe distance away,” said the pastor, “we rolled the victim around on the ground and used a blanket to smother the flames. Then we lifted her over the wall to the many waiting arms, including those of an off-duty paramedic.”

For the next seven months, the victim was in the burn center of Naval Medical Center, Portsmouth, where she underwent many surgeries—nine in just two months.

Divine Intervention???

“I think about the situation, and I count my blessings,” she said. “This mishap has changed my life significantly—it has given me a better look at people in general. If someone had told me I was going to be in a wreck like that and have people I didn’t even know save my life, I would have said, ‘No way!’”

Assigned to USS *Theodore Roosevelt* since May 2001, the victim was on board for the record-setting Operation Enduring Freedom deployment, as well as the ship’s most recent Operation Iraqi Freedom deployment. She hopes to report back to TR once fully recovered.

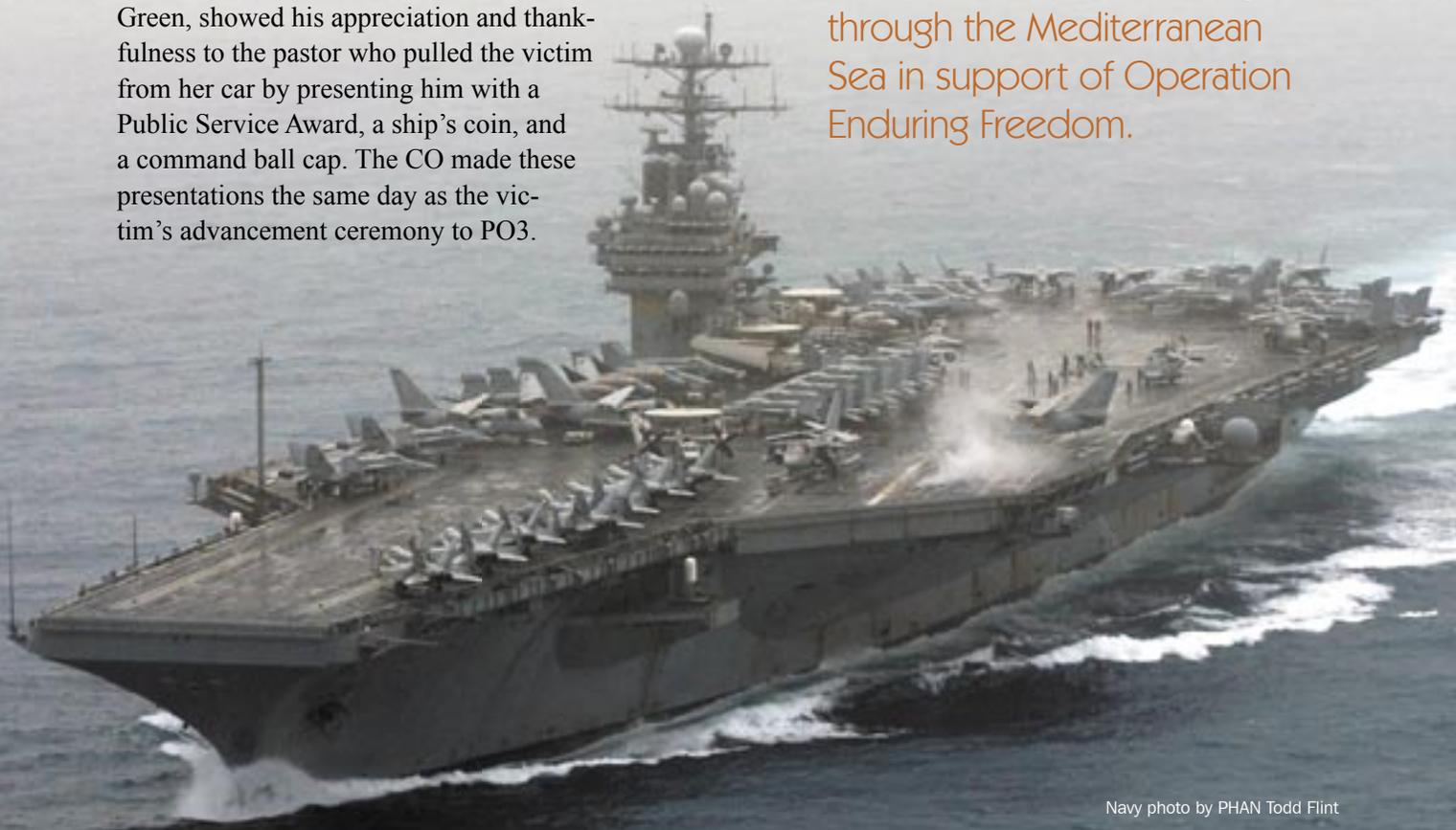
“I really miss the ship and the people,” she said. I made a lot of friends on board, and there aren’t a lot of jobs that allow you to meet people from all over the country like the Navy does.”

The *TR* Commanding Officer, Capt. Turk Green, showed his appreciation and thankfulness to the pastor who pulled the victim from her car by presenting him with a Public Service Award, a ship’s coin, and a command ball cap. The CO made these presentations the same day as the victim’s advancement ceremony to PO3.

“Without his [*the pastor’s*] direct intervention,” said the CO, “the victim might not be with us today. We often think of ourselves as barriers between evil and the American public, but that is what we do—we are Sailors. The pastor did that as a citizen for a Sailor, and that is just incredible to me.” ■

A slightly different version of this story first appeared in the May 27, 2004, issue of [The Flagship], a weekly newspaper produced by the public affairs staff of Commander Navy Region Mid-Atlantic.

Once fully recovered, the victim hopes to report back to TR, seen here powering through the Mediterranean Sea in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.



Navy photo by PHAN Todd Flint