

The Perils of



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(We congratulate the author on this winning entry in the Sea&Shore story contest that, as advertised on our website, ended Oct. 1, 2004.—Ed.)

Traffic safety applies to everything and everyone on the roads, including bicyclists, pedestrians, and even in-line skaters. Just ask the hero of the following tragedy:

Ah, to be young, single, and in Europe. This truly joyful mixture, in concert with plentiful liberty, had our hero high on life. What more could one ask?

Complete invulnerability and immunity from the laws of physics would have been nice.

Our hero (henceforth referred to as FN Tweedle) really was enjoying his tour of duty overseas. He had money in his pocket, liberty for the whole weekend, a fancy personal CD player (with matching headphones, yet), and a newly purchased pair of in-line skates.

All was well that fateful Saturday afternoon in December.

Fireman Tweedle zipped merrily hither and yon among the pre-holiday crowds in Italy, listening to his favorite tunes. He was clad dashingly in a black sweater and black jeans, with a really spiffy pair of sunglasses. He could just imagine the envious thoughts of his shipmates as they saw him zooming about.

Some of those shipmates probably should have grabbed FN Tweedle and warned him about skating in the midst of traditionally insane Italian traffic. They also might have talked to him about covering his ears with headphones—however stylish—when every sense must be on full alert to avert possible disaster. As evening descended, a few shipmates even might have put in a word or two about possibly removing the dark glasses.

Alas, none of those things happened. The facts of what happened instead are drawn from the police report and FN Tweedle's own statements later.

This particular Mediterranean town had a large hill—or perhaps a small mountain—up which the tiny, paved thoroughfares the Italians laughingly refer to as “roads” wound and twisted. Fireman Tweedle found himself far up the hill when the last local watering hole closed its doors. He probably gazed down the hill, his eyes wandering among the twisted stucco canyons, toward the NATO pier

IN-LINE SKATING in Italy

where the ship was moored, and thought, “This is gonna be soooooo cool!”

Our stalwart hero forthwith donned his blades, pulled his sunglasses down over his eyes, fired up the old CD crooner, and began to roll downhill.

I know you’re probably thinking he built up too much speed and wiped out around a corner or perhaps punched a cartoon-silhouette cutout through the wall of an Italian home on the way down. But neither happened. Fireman Tweedle was an experienced lunatic—he moderated his speed to what he felt comfortable with. Kudos!

Sadly, FN Tweedle seems to have been born lacking the ORM part of his brain. I’m talking about the little voice that asks questions like, “What’s the worst thing that can happen if I do this?”

He never thought that his black-on-black attire might make him less visible, especially on a dark night. Ditto for the sunglasses, which work like a charm against the rays of the sun but are far less than useful after sundown. He also probably never thought that wearing headphones and deafening himself with music might isolate him a bit too much from his surroundings. It’s further doubtful he considered the possibility that the—let us say—“energetic” Italian drivers are not known for adhering to the rules of the road.

And so, as our hero was slowing slightly to make a sweeping turn just ahead, he didn’t notice a young Italian national on his scooter a few yards behind him. This scooter pilot, as Italian drivers are prone to do, blipped his throttle and cut to FN Tweedle’s left, intent on taking the inside of the corner. The unaware FN Tweedle also cut for the inside of the same corner.

All together now (in the spirit of the season), we’ll do this to the tune of “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer”: “Sailor got run over by a moped...”

The Polizia Stradale (the Italian version of the highway patrol) arrived on the scene and quickly

determined that FN Tweedle was an American.

They thus hauled him back to the ship and deposited him into the caring hands of the ship’s CDO, who, understandably, was less than overjoyed.

After all, he had to crawl out of a nice, warm rack in the wee hours of the morning to deal with the local police. The CDO awakened the ship’s doctor, who examined FN Tweedle and pronounced him fit—well, sort of. The only problem was a broken left leg and (apparently) a complete lack of survival instincts.

Our forlorn fireman went to the nearest medical facility, which happened to be in Naples, an hour or so away. Doctors there repaired his broken leg, but he never could walk properly again. Six months later, he received a medical discharge.

The ship held all-hands training the day after FN Tweedle was carried off in an ambulance. Before this incident, the CO specifically had forbidden any of his Sailors to ride motorcycles or scooters. Renting cars also was forbidden. Now, in-line skating, bicycling and any other conveyance beyond hoofin’ it have been added to the “forbidden” list.

It probably never occurred to the skipper that anyone, least of all someone in his own well-trained crew, would do something so dumb.

What’s the lesson in this story? Simply declaring certain activities off-limits is not enough. The entire command, from the skipper all the way down to the newest swabbie, needs constant reminders about staying aware of the potential hazards in everyday activities. Using occupational risk management should be an automatic process by the time Sailors get to their first ship. Those who demonstrate less than adequate concern for their own physical well-being should be counseled repeatedly on the subject until it becomes automatic. ■

The author has been medically discharged from the Navy.