

# “...Till Death Do Us Part”

They were newlyweds—on their honeymoon, as a matter of fact—and probably feeling high on life. They certainly couldn’t have known what fate awaited them that July morning in central Washington state.

It was about 2 a.m. when the 21-year-old Sailor and his 22-year-old bride climbed into their SUV to leave a friend’s campsite. This campsite was located off a narrow, forest-service road that had no guardrails or lights and was bordered by a 150-foot cliff.

The Sailor had consumed about six cans of beer in a four-hour period (the mishap report listed his BAC as 0.12), and neither he, nor his wife, buckled their seat belts before starting back to their own campsite. While trying to turn around, the Sailor misjudged the distance from the side of the road to the cliff and drove over the edge. The SUV tumbled several times before coming to rest in a river below. Both occupants were ejected from the vehicle.

The friends who witnessed the tragedy hurried to a nearby ranger station and called for help. Sheriff’s deputies and search-and-rescue personnel quickly arrived and scaled down the cliffs to the victims, in the dark and without waiting for proper equipment. They found the couple at the bottom of the gorge.

The Sailor had died from a massive head injury—probably on impact. Meanwhile, his wife barely was conscious and breathing and had a very weak pulse. Unfortunately, nothing could be done for her, given the serious head and upper-body trauma she had suffered, and she, too, died after 20 minutes of first aid and CPR.

How much did alcohol contribute to this tragedy? According to the mishap report, the Sailor had been having four or five drinks daily. Records also show he had had one alcohol-related inci-



dent before going on leave. He was involved in a boating accident in which he had a BAC of 0.106. He had been scheduled for follow-up screening in the substance-abuse rehabilitation program to determine if he met the criteria for alcohol abuse or dependency.

Another possible contributing factor is that the Sailor hadn’t owned or operated a car during his overseas tour of duty. Before going overseas, he had driven one for about five years.

Finally, one has to ask: Could these young newlyweds have survived this crash if they had been wearing their seat belts? Consider this incident that occurred in California just two days after these newlyweds were killed.

A 20-year-old woman awoke just as the speeding car in which she was riding plunged over a 500-foot cliff. The male 22-year-old driver and a male 20-year-old passenger, who weren’t wearing seat belts, died when they were thrown from the car near the top of the cliff.

The car ended up about 200 feet down the steep ravine, where the young woman was able to unbuckle her seat belt and free herself from the wreckage. She then climbed the near-vertical slope,

summoned help, and was flown to a hospital. Doctors described her injuries as moderate.

As reported by the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA), seat belts have prevented 135,000 fatalities and 3.8 million injuries in the past 26 years, thus saving \$585 billion in medical and other costs. If all vehicle occupants had used seat belts during that period, nearly 315,000 deaths and 5.2 million injuries could have been prevented, at a cost savings of \$913 billion.

Figures like these, coupled with the fact that motor-vehicle crashes still are the leading cause of death among military personnel [65 percent of Sailors and 46 percent of Marines in FY04], forced Navy commands around the world to take action in May 2004. They partnered with the NHTSA and National Safety Council in the “Click It or Ticket” national enforcement campaign aimed at seat-belt violators. This campaign ran throughout the critical days of summer 2004. ■

## But for a Seat Belt...



**A** Navy lieutenant was elated to be home for the 2003 holidays after spending nearly two years in harm’s way aboard a ship that had been in and out of the Persian Gulf more times than his mother wanted to know. To commemorate his return, his family had planned a special reunion in Las Vegas.

All was going according to plan. The lieutenant had arrived at the airport, where his fiancée

met him. His parents and favorite aunt and uncle were waiting for them at a casino in Las Vegas. And, topping off the reunion was a special gift for his mom: rare concert tickets to a performance by Canadian diva Celine Dion.

Unfortunately, tragedy would steal the show. The lieutenant was so excited he forgot to fasten his seat belt after stopping for gas just outside Las Vegas. Then came sudden brake lights, and the