Back on the Iron Horse:

Motorcycling After a Six-Month Deployment

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I learned to ride motorcycles more than a year ago by taking the Motorcycle Safety Foundation's Basic Rider Course (BRC) at my last duty station in Norfolk. At the time, I'd never ridden before and had no plans to buy a motorcycle; I just thought it might be fun to try.

Shortly thereafter, I had to transfer to Whidbey Island on short notice. Knowing how much great riding was available there, I decided to get a bike after the move. Before I could purchase one, though, I needed to get a Washington license, which meant another trip through the BRC. Getting that course set up was pretty easy, and a month after moving to Whidbey, I was a licensed owner comfortably riding my bike.

The squadron to which I was going had an upcoming deployment, so in my spare time, I put a lot of effort into practicing basic skills and getting used to traffic. I had a game plan for getting more proficient. Each week, I would build upon my existing skill set, doing longer and longer rides to different places to build my familiarity and confidence with the bike. After two months of riding, I felt very comfortable in traffic and on the state highways, especially given the fact it was raining a lot of the time. With our deployment right around the corner, I decided to store the

bike in my buddy's garage—my single-car garage already was full. I must note here that his driveway was about 25 feet long and really steep.

Six months passed. I was finishing up cruise as the squadron safety officer and looking forward to getting back to Whidbey for those great rides and hopefully some awesome weather. I had been thinking a lot about how to get back up to speed and, in so doing, recognized a lot of potential hazards I wanted to avoid. I decided to identify all those hazards.

My first concern was getting my bike out of the garage with that steep driveway. My bike weighs 644 pounds empty. I knew if I dropped it coming out of there, my slide with it down the driveway would be less than pleasurable. That fact got me to thinking about how the bike maneuvers, particularly in counter-steering and at slow speeds. I knew I'd want to run up and down the streets around my friend's house a few times just to get a feel for the bike again. I then turned to thinking about traffic, wind blast, and most importantly, my "scan." In the BRC, they call it "rider radar": being alert to what's immediately in front of you, what's down ahead of you with a few seconds to react, and what's still further ahead, with plenty of time to react.

I also was very concerned about the pure "rust" on my abilities. Despite the fact I had been through the BRC twice in one year and had been riding and training on my own before the cruise started, I knew I wasn't ready to pick up where I had left off.

I figured there was a moderate chance I could get into trouble pretty quickly. However, my approach to biking thus far had been to treat certain aspects of it as sacred. I had been pretty conservative, wanting to ride as long as possible without wiping out for any reason. It seemed logical that any of the particular dangers from skills—be it rust or that steep driveway—had much less than a moderate chance of becoming a player, although their consequences likely would be severe.

I've always respected the law of averages and have based some actions on what the average chance of a negative consequence might be. In spite of the beautiful 70-degree weather in Washington during the summer, the most immediate way to reduce chances of injury is always to use proper protective gear—in this case, the heavier motorcycle jacket with elbow, shoulder and back pads. Gloves and a helmet are worn without question, but there's always a temptation to shed the jacket on a gorgeous day.

After coming home from a six-month cruise, with too few ports, my desire to go out and celebrate was running high. That feeling, of course, highlighted the obvious problem with drinking and driving. However, riding a motorcycle takes far more coordination than driving a car, and if you're impaired, you can dump the bike while doing even the simplest maneuver. I'm living by a strict standard these days: If I have even one drink in the afternoon, I'm done riding for the rest of that day and night.

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My opinion about motorcycling is the same as how I feel about aviation: It's not inherently dangerous, but it is especially unforgiving of mistakes. Considering all these hazards before returning from cruise, my approach to getting back into riding was to review the basics and to ride often to keep the new skills honed. The net result of this mental preparation was a successful return to the road.

After getting back the feel for my bike, I went out a few times and practiced some of the basic riding procedures they teach in the BRC: counter-steering, slow-speed maneuvers, quick stops, and swerves, just to name a few. I keep reviewing these skills on every ride, even if it means pulling into an empty parking lot somewhere for 10 minutes.

The preparation and regular practice have yielded good results—and, by that, I mean I haven't gotten into any trouble in getting reacquainted with the bike. However, a few unexpected hazards have arisen in the process. For one, nearly all my experience has been during winter and in overcast or rainy conditions. I'm also surprised to realize that, at dusk, with the setting sun at your back, other drivers have trouble seeing a rider. I'm certain I've ridden head-on toward cars with

Sailors participate in the Motorcycle Safety Foundation's Basic Rider Course, like the one the author had to take twice.

Navy photo by MC3 David Didier

the sun at my back, and they haven't seen me until the last minute. As taught in the BRC, I always ride with my headlight on bright during daytime hours. I'm also a lot quicker to slow down as I approach a car that appears to be ready to turn.

A second issue which hadn't occurred to me (but should have) was dehydration. I'm doing long rides now and am interested in making even longer trips. Having a good supply of water isn't the only important factor here; you also need to know how to carry it when you don't have saddlebags. I usually carry a backpack, but after a while, the straps tend to dig into my shoulders and cause stress. An alternative is to use magnetic bags that attach to the gas tank. The important lesson learned for me is to have water available somehow. The asphalt and air are pretty hot, and so is the bike; once you start putting on the PPE, it doesn't take long to sweat yourself into trouble.

Being away from the bike for months gave me time to think about all these hazards. I identified and assessed each one, which helped me get back into the riding environment safely and kept me motivated to know where my limits are.

You most likely realize the process I used to get myself back into riding shape again as operational risk management. Cases like mine show that ORM isn't just for on-the-job use. It can and must be applied to everything you do that involves risk.

For more info, go to: http://www.motorcyclecruiser.com/streetsurvival/experience/ or http://safetycenter.navy.mil/ashore/checklists/motorvehicle/motorcyclechecklist.htm.