

Los Angeles

After Dark

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VFA-22

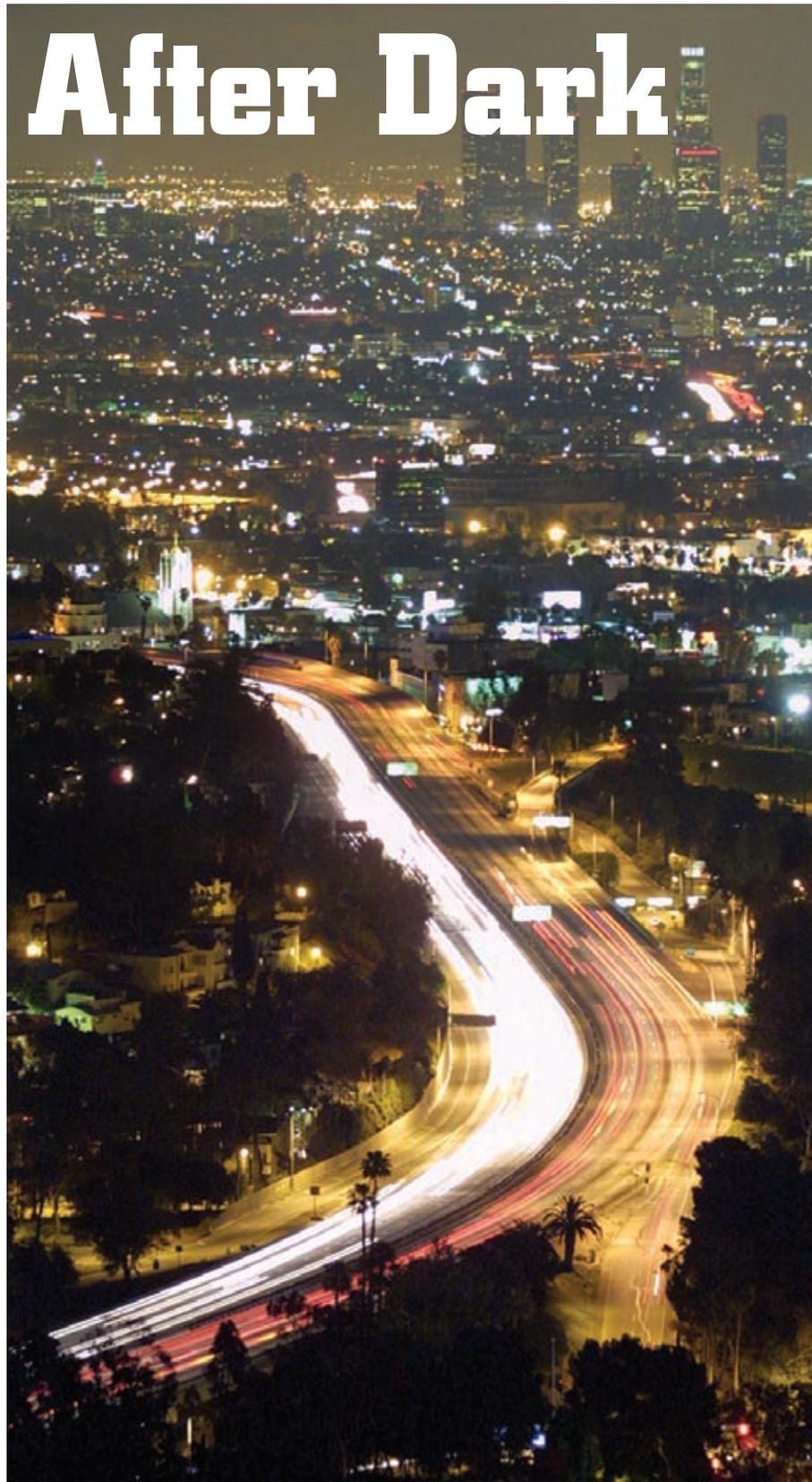
I couldn't have been more excited in March 2005—I had a chance to ride my Harley-Davidson Fatboy from Lemoore to San Diego for temporary duty. Here was a chance to get some road experience and to accumulate some miles on my motorcycle. An unexpected lesson awaited me.

At the time, I had seven years of riding experience, and I had attended the Basic Rider Safety course. I was wearing a full-face helmet, my leather flight jacket, leather chaps, my flight boots, and an orange safety vest.

I had checked the weather report for the route: Clear skies but a little chilly. My school started first thing Monday morning, so I decided to leave at 1200 on Sunday for what I thought would be a six-hour trip. At the last minute, I decided to change my route and take a more scenic trip through the Tehachapi Pass—I thought the distance would be about the same (it turned out to be 60 miles farther).

The journey started out great, with beautiful weather and moderate temperatures. A car wreck on Highway 99 slowed me down considerably, and I was forced into an unplanned stop because my left hand was starting to shake from all the clutch work needed at 10 mph. The slow traffic, unplanned stop, and longer route combined to put me about two hours behind schedule; however, I didn't yet realize how significant that would be.

Back on the highway, I started making my way through Los Angeles. I was impressed that I was able to keep a steady speed of 65 mph through the city. I had driven through it several times and always got caught in traffic. I had memorized my route and knew I nearly was out of LA, so I was pretty excited.



By 1730, dusk had taken full effect, and it rapidly was getting dark. Shortly afterward, I noticed I was being tailgated. I was in the left-most lane of three lanes going southbound on “The 5,” with all lanes moving about the same speed. I was really distracted by the car close behind me. I glanced back at him once too often, and when I turned my attention to the traffic ahead, I saw all three lanes were stopped dead about 30 feet distant. I immediately jammed on both brakes while still traveling at 65 mph.

The back tire locked and started to skid, but the motorcycle still was tracking straight and steady. Some quick math told me my current rate of deceleration would not keep me clear of the vehicle in front of me, so I released both brakes. I then jammed them on again, with more pressure on the front brake this time—a big mistake. The front tire locked, and as my bike started falling to the left, I knew I was going down.

My first thought was that my insurance bills were going to go up. Then my instincts kicked in, and I jumped onto the high side of the bike. I hit the left rear bumper of the car in front of me at a 45-degree angle and rolled off the bike like we had learned in elementary-school gymnastics.

About a second later, I sat up and did a quick inventory: Legs, arms and fingers were intact, and I didn’t seem to be bleeding. I jumped to my feet and looked at my bike, thinking, “How am I going to get to San Diego now?” That thought was interrupted by the owner of the car yelling, “Why did you hit me?” I had hit a new Toyota Camry and busted out the left brake and turn-signal light.

He got off easy. My motorcycle had \$3,000 worth of damage, including bent handlebars, but it still was operable. My guess is that I hit the car at between 5 and 10 mph. I remember picking up the bike, using only my arms instead of my legs. I was so full of adrenaline, the 670-pound bike felt like nothing.

Why did this trip turn out to be so expensive? Foremost, I didn’t bring along the principles of off-duty risk management. I thought I had everything planned, but

I never recalculated the trip length after I changed the route. If I had, I would have realized that leaving at 1200 would have me driving through LA traffic at dusk. I should have left earlier in the day or planned a stop to ensure I would be well-rested and mentally fresh for the challenging ride in front of me.

The Swiss-cheese model hit me: poor planning, fatigue from slow traffic, a surprise sunset, and a tailgating driver. If any of those hadn’t occurred, I likely would have avoided my mishap. That’s proof that, for ORM to work, you need to properly assess all the hazards, so you can implement the proper controls.

Another mistake was that I padlocked on the car in front of me and never looked to the sides. I had a six-foot-wide shoulder just to the left of me that I didn’t notice. I also misapplied the brakes. I’ve looked at countless motorcycle-safety pamphlets and documents since the incident, and they all say if the back brake locks, keep holding it. My bike was upright and steady after the back brake locked; I should have held the back brake and steadily increased pressure on the front brake. In retrospect, I only did two things right that night. I jumped on the high side of the bike to avoid crushing my leg, and I was able to roll off the bike and thus dissipate the kinetic energy of the crash.

I was lucky. My only injuries were embarrassment, a big bruise on my inner thigh from hitting the handlebar while jumping to the high side of the bike, and a \$3,000 repair bill. In case you’re wondering, I got to San Diego. I moved my bike to the median and sat there for about 45 minutes, getting my head back together and crying to my wife on a cellphone about how I had crashed my Harley. I then finished the trip, even though the handlebars were bent slightly to the left. The damage mostly was cosmetic, but the lessons I learned are priceless. **S**

The author is the squadron safety officer. The incident he described took place two years ago.

Resources:

- Risk Management Resources, <http://safetycenter.navy.mil/toolbox/riskmanagement/default.htm>
- Operational Risk Management Indoctrination Training, <http://safetycenter.navy.mil/presentations/orm/sourcefile/ormindoc.ppt>
- Motorcycle Safety Resources, <http://safetycenter.navy.mil/toolbox/traffic/motorcycles/default.htm>

