



The Fourth of July: Hamburgers, Hot Dogs, And an Hour of Hell!

By LtCol. Ed Billman, USAF(Ret.)

I always wear a seat belt when I'm in a moving vehicle; it doesn't matter whether I'm driving or riding. On rare occasions, when my wife is driving, I'll recline my seat and take a snooze, but I know the seat belt won't do its job right if I'm in that position during a crash. Because of the worry that I'll slide forward and down, probably strangling myself, I usually give up after a couple of minutes and return the seat upright.

Why am I such a seat-belt fan? It's because of something horrible I witnessed when I was 13. Our family had spent the Fourth of July at my grandparents' home in south Dallas. It was late afternoon, around dusk, and we were returning home along Loop 12, a major four-lane, divided road around Dallas. There was heavy holiday traffic, with people driving 70 mph (before speed limits changed to 55, then back again).

About a quarter-mile ahead, we saw an accident. Cars were moving onto the shoulder and slowing to avoid the crash; we did the same. As we passed the scene, we realized the accident just had happened. No police, firefighters or emergency personnel had arrived yet. Passersby were running to the wrecked cars to help the injured—and there were plenty.

Navy photo by J03 Ryan C. McGinley

I could see at least four cars involved. I remember seeing shoes on the pavement, along with a hat and, of course, car debris. Dad stopped on the shoulder, and he and I jumped out, hoping to help. Meanwhile, Mom and my little brother stayed in the car. Dad and I ran toward the closest cars, where dust and smoke were heavy in the air. People were shouting and screaming—it was a hellish, surreal sight.

Before we could get to the nearest vehicle, we heard the sound of an approaching car. Someone yelled, “Look out!” I turned around just in time to see a small car coming over the crest of a hill behind us. It was going too fast to stop and probably didn’t even see the stopped traffic ahead. Dad and I jumped back just in time to watch the small car crash no more than 10 feet away.

In an awful instant, and with a force and gnashing bang I never will forget, the small car smashed into the back of the vehicle in front of us. The next few seconds were pure chaos, with people tumbling and yelling. Adding to the confusion was the horn on the small car, which went off during the crash and kept blaring.

Dad and I ran to the small car and found fluids coming from underneath. I smelled gasoline. A young woman, about 30, was in the driver’s seat and conscious. Dad and another man pulled her out and took her to a grassy area where we could administer first aid. The steering wheel and dashboard had done to her what you always

hear they do, so I won’t go into details. Let’s just say she was lucky to be alive, and, given the half-dollar-size hole in her forehead, we were amazed she was coherent. Maybe it would have been easier for her—and everyone—if she had been unconscious.

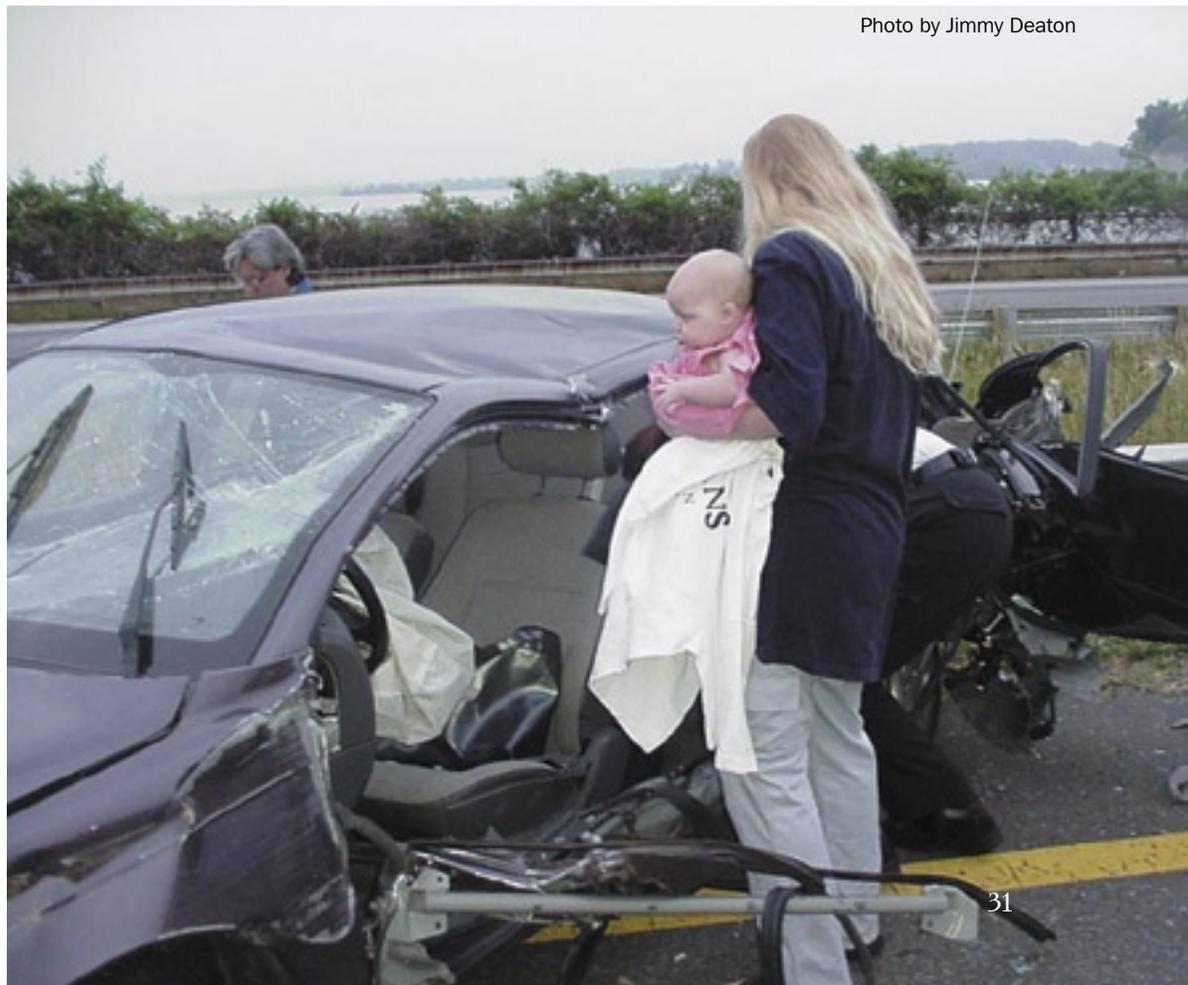
“Where’s my baby? Where’s my baby?” she kept screaming as we tried to calm her and treat her injuries. I looked at the car and saw the windshield was gone; no one else was inside.

It was getting dark when the faint sounds of sirens signaled that help was approaching. Shock, loss of blood, and injuries were slowing down the woman. Her pleas about her baby now were just moans.

About this time, a new sound captured my attention, and I swung my head around to see a man with a tire tool banging wildly at the engine compartment of the woman’s car. The hood had opened during the crash, and he was trying to silence the horn. He was frantic, with tears streaming down his face, repeatedly yelling, “Shut up, dammit! Shut up!”

By now, firefighters, police and emergency personnel were everywhere. We all felt comforted, even though the scene was loud, dark and ghastly. Then, a firefighter came by with something wrapped in his coat. He signaled for one of the medical technicians working on the woman. The technician went over, and the two talked briefly. The firefighter opened his coat

Photo by Jimmy Deaton



Unlike the young woman and baby in this story, these victims appear to have been “buckled up” when their crash occurred.

a little and slowly shook his head, then the technician returned to the woman. She still was asking about her baby.

The technician said, “Lady, your baby is OK. You’re going to be fine, too.” Then he stood and motioned to me. I went to him, and he said, “I’m going for a gurney. She’s pretty bad. She needs to calm down. Tell her that her baby is OK.”

I challenged him, “Was that her baby the firefighter had?”

“Yes,” he replied. “He found the baby 100 yards down the highway.” He paused, then added, “Tell her the baby is OK. It’s important for her.”

Stunned and sluggish, I walked back to Dad, the woman, and the others. A combination of the scene, the shock, and the news I just had heard made me numb. For the next few minutes, Dad and I, along with everyone else, repeatedly lied to the woman, trying to convince her that her dead baby was OK, and everything was going to be all right. Then, an ambulance whisked her away. Tired and still in shock, we, too, left. It was a quiet, strange ride home.

I checked the newspaper the next day and found the story: a dozen people hurt, some hit by the fast-approaching car. Four people had died that evening, including three adults and one 18-month-old baby. None of them had been wearing seat belts—not unusual for the 60s. The paper said the child’s mother was in serious condition. And I don’t know how they knew, but the story said the child had been standing on the front seat at the time of the crash.

That scene really traumatized me. I was consumed with it for days, bothered by it for weeks, and still often recall it. So many images from that day are burned permanently into my mind. In a sad way, I’m thankful for the life-and-death lesson. What I have in return for that hour in hell is the certainty that anyone I care about will wear a seat belt as long as I’m in the car, too.

Now that I have small children, I’m probably a bit over-protective about child seats and safety. My kids complain that they can’t travel in the front seat. “So-and-so does,” they tell me. On occasion, we take friends’ kids with us, and I insist they sit at the sides

A base firefighter inspects the installation of a child’s safety seat.



where they can wear a shoulder strap. They sometimes whine that they get to sit in the middle of the seat when they’re with their folks. I simply say, “Not in my car,” and that’s the end of it.

One thing that enrages me is the too-frequent scene of children under 5 years of age climbing around unrestrained in the family car while mom runs errands around town or dad barrels down the interstate. My heart aches for those kids, who are oblivious to their danger, helpless to care for themselves, and content their parents always will be around to protect them. What a horrible betrayal of trust! I think to myself, “What is wrong with those parents? Where have they been the last 30 years?”

I’ve replayed that Fourth of July scene in my head dozens of times. I wish there were a way I could plant that experience in the heads of all those irresponsible parents I see on the road. They probably would pull over and hug their kids for an hour, and they probably never again would drive with their kids unrestrained. ■

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