

Dream Motorcycle Trip Becomes a Nightmare

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My saddlebags were packed, and my bike was fueled and ready to go. It was a beautiful morning, and the forecast called for an above-average warm and sunny, November, Florida day. I was in a great mood because I finally was getting to make the 510-mile ride from Jacksonville, Fla. to Key West on my new 2003 cruiser—a motorcycle made for the sole purpose of riding in comfort over long distances. I had dreamed of riding across the 7-mile stretch of bridge near Key West since the day I got my first Harley-Davidson.

I'm a member of a motorcycle group, with mostly seasoned riders. We do parades and charity work. I've ridden various types of motorcycles for 19 years and am a motorcycle-safety instructor for the base where I'm assigned. My group makes this ride annually, but this year would mark my first time—Navy commitments never had allowed me to go before.

The plan called for everyone to rendezvous at a pancake house near Saint Augustine before sunrise, get a good breakfast, and head south. A friend and

I were the first to arrive. As others began to trickle in, I noticed a new rider—one who wasn't a regular member of our unit. I later found out he was interested in joining our group, and other members had invited him to come on this trip so he could get acquainted with everyone.

By the time we had eaten and were ready to saddle up, 14 beautiful Electra Glide Ultra Classics were sitting in the parking lot. As we were gearing up and getting into position to start the ride, I noticed that our guest wasn't wearing a helmet. It's legal in Florida to ride without a helmet, as long as you carry the required medical insurance, and no one challenged him about it.

I also saw three members leave the parking lot ahead of us. They had said they were tired of waiting. I later found out the main reason they had left early was that they weren't comfortable riding so far with a large group. I was tempted to strike out behind them and ride solo or in a smaller group but decided to stick with the main formation and the friend I had ridden with to the pancake house.

The sun was coming up as we merged onto Interstate 95 and headed south. We got into the formation we would ride in for the rest of the day. We were lined up in a single lane, with the bikes staggered left to right from the lead rider to the last man. We remained in the same position, except after stopping for gas or to pay a toll, at which time some members would move forward or backward a spot or two.





I initially lined up as the fourth man in the group but sometimes alternated to the third spot in our formation of 11 riders. The new guy ended up as the second rider. As the trip progressed, I noticed he would set his motorcycle on cruise control every 20 or 30 minutes and take his hands off the handlebars. He then would light up a cigarette or wave his arms and roll his shoulders, as if he was experiencing stiffness in his upper body. He usually waited until traffic wasn't congested, and it was as safe as possible to do what he was doing, but I decided to keep him on my radar for the rest of the trip—just in case. After going a hundred miles, we left the interstate and got on a turnpike, where the traffic became more congested and the tollbooths grew more numerous.

I noticed our fair-skinned guest was starting to get a sunburn. During a gas stop just after midday, I saw him pull a bandana from his saddlebags and drape it over his head and sunburned neck. He then put a hat over the bandana to hold it on. As we left the gas station, I was in the third spot, directly behind him, and soon realized he was becoming much more animated on his motorcycle. With increased regularity, he would put his bike in cruise control and take his hands off the handlebars, despite the congested traffic. At times, he even would turn and wave at cars with both hands as we passed them.

I didn't want to break off with our group in this heavy traffic and possibly cause an accident, so I eased up on the throttle a little to open the distance from our guest. I also decided I would try talking to him at our next stop about the risks he was taking.

It was about 1:15 p.m. when I saw him again take his hands off the handlebars, turn sideways, and start waving at a car beside

us. While I was focusing on him and the car he was interacting with, traffic ahead of us narrowed from two lanes to one as the turnpike ended. He stopped waving at the car just in time to turn around and see nothing but brake lights ahead of him. He overreacted and jumped hard on both his front and rear brakes, which caused him to skid sideways, with the front of his bike facing to the left side of the road.

I didn't feel it would be safe for me to stop abruptly in the heavy traffic, so I tried to go around the rear of his motorcycle. As soon as I dedicated myself to this action, he let up on his brakes, causing his bike to go into a violent wobble. It started sliding directly toward me. I reacted by turning harder to the right, but, by this time, I was riding the yellow line marking the shoulder of the road and was within a few feet of the guardrail.

Just as it looked like I would be able to get around his bike, he was ejected and landed hard, face-first, on the road in front of me. I had no reaction time left, and my motorcycle ran directly over the top of his body. This impact caused me to lose control of my motorcycle, and I, too, went down. I somehow came clear of my motorcycle after hitting the pavement and proceeded to tumble down the road. When I finally came to a stop, I was amazed to find I still was alive and was standing on my feet...or so I thought.

Being a long-time Navy technician, I immediately did a visual op check of my body to see how I had fared. Everything seemed OK until my scan reached my feet—my left foot was at a 90-degree





angle. I next observed I was standing in the middle of the right-hand traffic lane. My friends later told me I took a couple of hops before dropping and rolling until I was under the guardrail. I also later found out the rider immediately behind me had locked up his brakes, slid 65 feet, and ended up wedged under the guardrail on the opposite side of the road.

The highway-patrol report said we were going the speed limit (65 mph) at the time of the crash. During my life flight to the Miami Trauma Center, I learned that the rider whose actions had led to the accident—and who had chosen not to wear protective equipment—had died at the scene. The rider directly behind me was wearing full safety gear, as well as leather chaps, and escaped with a broken collarbone and multiple road abrasions on his upper body. He also required reconstructive surgery on his right elbow.

I was wearing full safety gear, except for leather chaps, and ended up with torn ligaments in my left shoulder, four broken ribs, a collapsed lung, three broken bones in my left leg, and multiple road abrasions to my knees, elbows and shoulder. I was on convalescent leave for more than three months and spent almost four months using a walker or crutches. I have been undergoing two to four physical-therapy sessions a week for the last two months and anticipate another month or two of those sessions before I'm done. My gloves show the marks of saving my hands from further road abrasions, and my helmet has a large dent on the left side. Without them, my injuries would have been much worse.

The final accident-report findings say the rider who died at the scene caused the accident through his actions, and he was charged with reckless driving. He died from massive blunt trauma to his head when he initially hit the road. The findings went on to state he had a BAC level of 0.03, and he was under the influence of a strong painkiller at the time of the accident. One of our members told me that he had seen the victim

drink two 16-ounce beers at the last rest stop we made before the accident. It's the policy of our group not to drink and ride. No one else was drinking that day, except him.

We all learned a hard lesson that day about having rules and enforcing them as a group. Several of us had opportunities throughout the day to talk to our guest rider about his actions but didn't do it. While talking about it later, we all said we didn't feel comfortable challenging him because we didn't know him—a costly mistake we all agreed never to make again.

I've always felt I'm a very capable and safe rider. I also always have acknowledged that a motorcycle provides no protection in an accident, except for the PPE you're wearing. As a rider and motorcycle-safety instructor, I can list many examples of other riders who were taken down through no fault of their own. Do yourself and your loved ones a big favor: Wear your PPE every time because you never know when your luck is going to run out. ■

All accompanying photos were taken at the actual accident scene, except the photo of the 7-mile bridge on the first page. —Ed.

