

Surviving a

Rear-End

Collision

By AM1(AW) Bruce Barclay



“Most serious motor-vehicle accidents happen within five minutes of a person’s home.” We’ve all heard that statement, but I’d never given it much thought until the day of my crash.

I had worked a 12-hour shift, then had gone to the gym at NAS Whidbey Island. After working out, I left the base through the north gate, which feeds onto Washington State Route 20 by way of a short, two-lane road. It was 0830, and the road was wet.

At the intersection with SR20, I was surprised to see the southbound lane was clear, while the northbound lane was busy. I turned right, and, as I approached the next intersection, I turned on my left-hand signal, then waited for traffic.

Looking in my rearview mirror, I saw a truck coming on fast. I could read the words the woman driver was mouthing, “Oh my God!” I heard her lock up the truck’s brakes. It was too late for me to do anything. I took my eyes off the mirror just in time for the 1991 Toyota truck to hit me from behind. I remember feeling glass hitting me in the back of the head, and my vehicle moving through the intersection and sliding off the road to the right.

Realizing the back of my head was bleeding, I grabbed a T-shirt and a bottle of water. I soaked the shirt with water and pressed it against the back of my head. A woman, who had been sitting in her car and had witnessed the accident, came alongside my truck and asked if I was OK. I said I had hit my head on the back window and was applying pressure to slow down the bleeding. She asked me to help her with the other driver, who was slumped over the steering wheel, possibly suffering from shock.

The woman still was slumped over the wheel as we approached her car. I touched her shoulder and asked if she was OK. She said she was and, at the



same time, asked about my condition. By now, a line of cars was building behind us, so I suggested we all get off the street before another accident happened.

The other driver, a veterinary assistant, later admitted she wasn’t paying attention to the road before the collision.

When we got to the side of the road, the other driver wanted to check my head injury. She inspected the injury, then went back to her truck and got a first-aid kit to dress my wounds. An ambulance crew arrived minutes later, put a cervical collar around my neck, and secured me to a backboard. One EMT said a lot of victims end up going into the lane of oncoming traffic, where a head-on collision occurs.

A couple of days after my mishap, I went to the impound yard to look at my truck. I then learned what really had happened to me. When my truck was hit from behind, my seat reclined, and the forces of the collision sent my body sliding up the seat back, causing my head to shatter the rear window. I thought, “If I was sent through the rear window of the truck, then what stopped me from breaking my neck, skull or spine?” I had to be moving fast to shatter a window without feeling it. I found the answer when I looked at my seat belt. “That’s what saved me from further injury and possibly saved my life!” I concluded.

While inspecting my seat belt, I learned a valuable lesson. You need to check its caution label after a collision. If the words “Replace Belt” are visible on the label, the vehicle must be returned to a dealership and the seat belt replaced. I found this guidance in my owner’s manual—that book you toss in the glove box without ever reading. Read your owner’s manual, and always buckle up when getting behind the wheel of a car.

Petty Officer Barclay wrote this story while assigned to VP-1.

