

No Laughing Matter



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March 25 was an eventful day for me: It was the first time I got to ride my new motorcycle, and it was the first time I got to ride in an ambulance.

I just had received the new Harley-Davidson I had ordered during the last deployment. Because it had been a long time since I had ridden, I decided to take things slow until I got used to riding again. I had my license, had taken a motorcycle-safety course, and had ridden before. So, even though it was my first time on a Harley, I was confident I would have no problems. After all, the only way to get experience on a big Harley is to ride one.

Because of the way it's made and because it weighs 714 pounds, the Harley has a heavier turn than

I was used to. Even my friend's Valkyrie Interstate (a very big bike) requires less effort to turn. I also noticed the clutch was a little stiffer. I should have paid more attention to both differences.

As soon as I started riding, the mechanics started coming back to me. It's amazing how your muscles can remember what they're supposed to do. I was riding around town, enjoying the feel again. I especially was enjoying riding my own Harley.

I soon started looking for more places to ride and remembered the general area where another squadron officer lived. I had been to his house once before and thought I could find it. I decided to show off my new motorcycle, and having to spend time riding around to find his house was an added bonus.

His house was at the end of a cul-de-sac, so I parked next to the curb, at the end of the street. Everything was OK until I got ready to leave. I was busy talking and didn't pay enough attention to what I was about to do. As I took off, I forgot about the stronger clutch. Instead of my letting it off slowly and easing away from the curb, the clutch slipped out, and I took off faster than intended.

"No problem," I thought. "I'll just make a shorter turn." The only problem was that I also had forgotten about the heavier turn. Before I could react, the bike hit the curb, flipping machine and rider into the grass.

As soon as I sat up, I knew something was wrong: My right arm was flopped backward, in the opposite direction from where it's supposed to go. It didn't hurt—yet—because I was too upset with myself. A few years earlier, I had been out riding and watched a guy in front of me do almost the same thing. I couldn't believe he had made such a simple mistake, and now I just had done the same thing.

When the ambulance had taken me to the emergency room, X-rays showed that I had dislocated my elbow. By the time doctors had put it back in place, my arm had turned pale, cold and clammy. The misplaced bone was cutting off circulation. I had torn the ligaments around my elbow and stretched out the nerves. The doctors told me I was lucky I hadn't damaged the nerves; they also said it was unusual I hadn't broken any bones.

Once I returned to work, I heard all the expected jokes—I even added a few of my own. After all, our squadron just had had a motorcycle-safety meeting the first day I was on my new motorcycle, which, incidentally, made it through the crash with no damage. I told people I threw myself under the bike to protect it.

The incident became less funny to me after learning I never would regain a full range of motion in my arm. And, after spending a couple days doing everything with my left hand (I'm right-handed), a little more humor wore off. Simple things like cooking dinner or tying my shoes became a real challenge. Even sleeping isn't so easy any more.

With the warm, sunny weather that California is famous for looming on the horizon, I'll be forced to spend all of it just looking at my motorcycle sitting in the garage. That's especially painful because I had wanted a Fat Boy for about 15 years—and they've only been making them for 16 years. Instead of riding, I'll be in a brace for six weeks, followed by physical therapy. I won't be able to ride for three months. So, trust me—motorcycle safety is no laughing matter. ■



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