

# Shiny-Side-Down... 1st Time in 40 Years

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With my left arm in a sling, I look just like I walked out of a commercial for an insurance company. The truth is that I wiped out on my motorcycle while traveling home from work.

I want to use this venue to pass along some lessons learned from this experience... so that the rest of you can learn from what I did wrong and also what I did right. Forgive me for lapsing into SIR (safety-investigation report)-speak, but it's appropriate.

## Narrative

Mishap motorcycle operator (MMO) has two motorcycles for family use: One is a touring model, and the other is a sport cruiser. MMO routinely rides touring motorcycle to work but on this day had decided to ride the sport cruiser to charge the battery—spouse doesn't use it much. This motorcycle was configured for a shorter rider (e.g., height of the motorcycle had been lowered to accommodate a lower straddle-high, resulting in less clearance for the foot controls). MMO had had approximately two hours of riding on this motorcycle in the last 30 days.

At approximately 1630 EDT, MMO (sole occupant) departed base work center. He had been riding for 40 years without a mishap. Weather was day VFR (visual flight rules): clear skies, no rain in the past 24 hours. Road conditions were dry, with no loose gravel or sand.

Less than a half-mile from residence, MMO approached a 90-degree, flat turn to the left. He had traveled through this curve on the touring motorcycle hundreds of times in past years and about 20 times in the past week. However, he had not correctly assessed foot-peg clearance on this sport cruiser while in a tight turn. MMO customarily traversed this 90-degree turn at a reduced speed... below the current approximately 20 mph.

Navy photos by Dan Steber



The author and his sling. (Inset) His scraped and gouged helmet.

About a quarter of the way through the turn, MMO increased his lean into the turn to maintain ground track. The motorcycle's left foot peg hit the ground because of the increased angle of bank, and MMO immediately detected a loss of friction between the back wheel and the road. A lateral-directional

departure (aft wheel skidding out to right) followed, during which the motorcycle developed 90 degrees of sideslip and 90 degrees of left-wing-down AOB. Bike went down in approximately one second.

MMO hit left shoulder on asphalt, separated from bike, and proceeded to body-surf approximately 5 to 10 feet, while motorcycle slid approximately 10 feet, coming to rest next to him. It soon shut itself down from fuel starvation brought on by its unusual attitude.

MMO was completely protected from road-rash injury by personal protective equipment: light-colored long-sleeve shirt and pants, boots, leather gloves, DOT-approved helmet, and goggles. Motorcycle had only minor damage.

MMO collected what remained of his wits and fortunately wasn't run over by following traffic, which came along about 15 seconds post-mishap. Passersby called 911 after MMO discovered that his left arm wasn't responding to control inputs. MMO sustained no other apparent injuries but still got to ride in a big red ambulance. Follow-up X-rays revealed MMO had fractured his collarbone and No. 2 rib [no surgery or physical therapy required, though].

### Causal Factors

Failure to properly assess risks associated with lowered suspension and controls. Accepted. MMO should have recognized that lower foot controls didn't provide the level of clearance to which he was accustomed.

### Contributing Factors

Contributing factors were: (a) psychosocial pressure to get home on time for dinner (get-there-i-tis), (b) complacency because of unusually high number of motorcycle hours in the previous 30 days on differently configured motorcycle, (c) habit pattern developed during previous operations on that 90-turn turn at 20 mph with no problems.

OK, so much for all the Safety Center-ese. Here are the points I'd like to leave with you:

- I got lucky. Had traffic been a factor—following, or worse yet, opposing—I might be pushing up daisies right now. The motorcycle also stayed away from me, instead of catching up and sliding into or over me.

- Experience doesn't always make you better. If it breeds complacency—and it usually does—it actually can work against you. Put another way, just because you get away with something 100 times doesn't mean

you'll get away with it on the 101st time. I was too comfortable with the same road I drove on every day and had developed habit patterns on a different motorcycle. Know and understand what's different today and what your limitations are for the current conditions.

- There's no such thing as a short ride. I wiped out less than a half-mile from my driveway.

- The biggest take-away: PPE works. My shoulder injury is an impact injury. The motorcycle gear I wore was a canvas-like material. My boots worked; my toes and ankles weren't hurt. Afterward, I noticed a slight bump on my left knee, but there was no road rash. My helmet, goggles and leather gloves did the rest. Even at such a low speed, my helmet was gouged and scraped. If not for the PPE, I really don't believe I would be here today writing this article.

There isn't a smidgen of road rash on me—I didn't leave a single skin cell on the asphalt. In the past year or so, I've become religious about not driving 50 feet on my bike without suiting up completely, even on the hottest and most humid summer days. That discipline saved me a lot of pain.

I strongly recommend that all motorcyclists invest in good riding gear. Don't just stop with the helmet and jacket; buy some lower-body protection, too. In other words, skimp on the motorcycle before you skimp on the safety gear.

One last thing: Reread my "causal factors" listed earlier. They apply to a lot more than just motorcycling—flying, for one. Complacency is complacency in any environment.

Pardon the length of this article, but if it helps just one person anytime in the future, it will have been worth all the one-handed typing. **S**

*The author is head of the Aviation Safety Programs Directorate.*

### Resources:

- Motorcycle Safety Resources, <http://safetycenter.navy.mil/toolbox/traffic/motorcycles/default.htm>

- Sharing the Roadway—Motorists and Motorcyclists in Traffic, [http://safetycenter.navy.mil/ashore/motorvehicle/motorcycle/](http://safetycenter.navy.mil/ashore/motorvehicle/motorcycle/SharingTheRoadway8.04revs.pdf)SharingTheRoadway8.04revs.pdf

- Motorcycle Safety Information, <http://safetycenter.navy.mil/ashore/motorvehicle/motorcycle/default.htm>