

If I Only Knew Then

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The services have been nibbling away at the PMV-fatality problem for decades; yet, despite our efforts, the rates continue with little to no sustainable improvement. Privately owned motor vehicles and the young 18-to-25-year-old drivers remain the No. 1 cause of death for our Sailors and Marines.

Of all the causes of accidental Navy deaths in FY02, 58 percent of our Sailors died on the highway. At the end of FY05, following a two-year initiative to cut mishap rates in half, 57 percent of all accidental Sailor fatalities were the result of PMV mishaps.

First, the good news: Because of our collective efforts during the FY04 and FY05 mishap-prevention campaign, at least 17 Sailors are alive today, thanks to the fact we maintained our campaign's FY02 baseline PMV-fatality rates. Now, the bad news: Nine sailors have been killed in PMV mishaps during the first two weeks of FY06, which is nearly three times worse than the previous five-year-to-date average. If Navy PMV-fatality rates continue at their current trend, FY06 will be **worse** than each of the previous **24** years.

If ever there was a need to change the way we attack this epidemic, the time is **now**. It's apparent that our ALSAFE and ALNAV messages, our drive-safe lectures, and our posters are not having an effect. Our on-base, mandatory, seat-belt laws aren't being enforced adequately. Our requirement for formal motorcycle training and correct PPE before bringing one's 120-plus mph motorcycles on base aren't curbing the problem off base. Neither is the state trooper with his horrific movies at base theaters, nor the demolished vehicle on display at main gates, getting through. It's obvious, or it should be, that if we continue to fight the battle with the same tactics, we merely will achieve the same results.

Several years ago, as the father of 18- and 14-year-old boys, I took an excellent series of parenting classes, in which I learned the best person to fix a problem is the one who takes ownership of both the problem **and** the solution. One can lecture (scream, rant and rage), but, until the owner of the problem is given the responsibility to find the solution, the problem only gets worse.



While our efforts have been well-intentioned, Navy leadership has failed to lead or to mandate a change in the way our 18-to-25-year-old target population behaves when at the controls of a car or motorcycle. When it comes to off-duty driving behavior, they don't listen to us, nor do they hear our message. How many average teenagers truly listen and comprehend when their parents lecture them over and over to change their behavior?

While it's true our PMV-fatality rate is somewhat better than the 18-to-25-year-old civilian population, losing more than 400 Sailors and Marines every three years **never** should be considered the cost of doing business. Neither should its impact on our unit morale and our combat readiness be taken for granted. Ask any CO who lost a member of his/her command in a PMV mishap if (in hindsight) there was anything he/she could have done differently to prevent such a senseless loss of life. Ask him/her how long it took the command to regain the same level of readiness that was evident before the death of a Sailor.

Every CO and XO has one exceptional E-4 or E-5 in the command who stands out among his/her peers—the Sailor others go to for advice and assistance, the one respected by both peers and leadership for his/her professional expertise, dedication and ability to lead. If I were a CO again, I would call this Sailor, along with his/her department head, division officer, CPO, LPO, and the CMC into my office and discuss the Navy's PMV-fatality rate. I would explain

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to them how each night I go to sleep praying that I don't get a call from the duty officer, telling me that one of my Sailors has been killed behind the wheel. I would tell them I'm not convinced we're doing all we can do, and, while our efforts have been well-intentioned, I don't think we're getting to our younger Sailors. I then would inform this junior petty officer that, based on the level of respect he/she has earned among his/her peers, I was selecting him/her to be petty officer in charge of the command's new peer-advocacy group (PAG).

Comprising this PAG would be our youngest Sailors, who would have the job of reviewing, revamping and revitalizing our PMV and off-duty safety programs. I would ensure the junior petty officer knew he/she and the PAG had the full support of the CMC, the XO, and me and whatever resources I could make available. I also would ensure the PAG was afforded the full support of my wardroom, the chief's mess, and the first-class mess. I would tell him/her that the PAG was responsible for initiating all new off-duty safety initiatives and developing new training opportunities to elevate our PMV and recreational/off-duty safety programs. The PAG would work closely with our safety office. The PAG would **approve** all new PMV safety initiatives (POD notes, safety lectures, presentations at quarters, etc.) to make sure the message being generated was appropriate and was being presented in a manner that ensured it was heard loudly and clearly by our target population.

One of the first initiatives I would ask the PAG to accomplish would be to create a comprehensive list of all the “negative” and “positive” *consequences* involved if/when a Sailor made one or more of the following decisions:

- Not to wear a seat belt behind the wheel
- Not to make everyone in his/her car wear a seat belt
- Not to stop a shipmate from driving drunk
- To get behind the wheel after drinking
- To get in a vehicle being driven by someone drunk

Because Navy commands historically are bombarded with all the **bad** things that can happen to Sailors when they don't buckle up or when they drive drunk, I would tell the PAG POinC to file away the list of negative consequences. Instead, I would ask him/her to carefully discuss and sequentially attack each of the real and/or perceived *positive consequences*—those “good” things that are so powerful they outweigh common sense and (the now engrained) “bad things” that often happen when we make poor decisions behind the wheel. These *positive consequences* likely would include such things as:

- Wanting to look “cool” behind the wheel
- Being able to turn around and talk to those in the back
- Not being viewed as a nerd
- Being able to reach his/her CDs
- Peer pressure
- Just wanting to have more fun
- Being able to get out of the car quickly before it catches fire in a crash (my favorite)
- Increased self-confidence

Before the POinC reconvened the PAG, I would offer to help him/her prepare answers on how best to address each of the positive consequences the group came up with. By attacking each perception individually, the group likely would come to a better understanding of how to help themselves and one another collectively to reduce peer-pressure influence and to make better/smarter decisions.

The creation of the PAG and my selection of the PAG POinC would be announced at quarters, 30 minutes following our meeting. I would tell my command and my new PAG POinC that I'd still lie awake at night worrying about my Sailors, but that our newly formed group was my *champion for change*. ■