

Life After

Tragedy

By Dan Steber,
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As Navy DC1(SW) Neal Beard strapped into a rented 2003 Mitsubishi Diamante for an Oct. 25, 2003, drive from Corpus Christi to Houston, Texas, he was excited. He had a set of orders. After three ships in four years (split tour between USS *Doyle* and USS *Chief*, and a flag-directed tour aboard USS *Blackhawk*), he was ready for a change. The trip to Houston was to place a down payment on an apartment.

Riding with Petty Officer Beard that day were his children: 11-year-old son, Jesse; 9-year-old daughter, Breana; and 10-year-old son, Brandon. He had sole guardianship of these youngsters, and they were the focus of his life, but he was looking for a new career challenge, too.

The orders to Naval Reserve Center, Houston, would offer such a challenge. It was a chance to become a school-trained instructor.

“I always had wanted to teach,” Neal said. “I spent most of my career training and ‘teaching’ aboard various ships and while ashore. I also had worked with and mentored kids in elementary schools since 1997.”

The Beard family left Corpus Christi at 0940, arrived in Houston around noon, looked at the apartment, and made the payment. Before heading back to Corpus Christi, they stopped for lunch. It was about 1400 before they got on the road for home, with Neal driving, Jesse in the front-passenger seat, and Breana and Brandon settled comfortably in the rear seat. All of them had their seat belts fastened.





“I always had been very emphatic about using seat belts,” Neal said. “I would not move the car unless everyone was buckled up, so my children never questioned it. They were taught from birth to buckle up or to use a child-safety seat.”

It was one of those days that bounced between light and dark as clouds moved across the sky. The lighting changes and the passing scenery were creating a hypnotic state—one that would change the Beard family’s lives forever.

Neal had been busy the past few months. After completing his third training cycle in three years, the final one as the engineering department LPO, he was ready for shore duty. He had left the ship and was TAD to MWR while waiting to transfer. Working on the Navy Ball kept him busy during the day, and taking care of his kids filled his nights. He didn’t get much sleep in the days, weeks and months before the trip to Houston. In fact, Neal said a “good night’s sleep” had meant only five or six hours of shut-eye.

Getting ready for the upcoming move, fretting over marital problems, dealing with work-related issues, and being the father of three had taxed his body and mind. One hundred thoughts raced through his head as he turned the vehicle southbound on U.S. Highway 77. He was tired but didn’t know it.

At 1620, Neal and his family were about 13 miles north of Refugio, Texas, which is about 54 miles from Corpus Christi. Fatigue finally took control, and Neal nodded off. The 2003 Diamante left the road, crossed the median, struck a tractor-trailer, and rolled over, coming to rest upright in a side ditch.

The trucker was OK, but the right front section of his rig was damaged. The front of Petty Officer Beard’s vehicle also was smashed, and the rear end was crushed. He doesn’t remember anything about the events just before or after the mishap. However, the police report contains a quickly sketched drawing that shows the step-by-step details of the mishap.

Pat and Kim Moya of Bay City, Texas, were two of the first people on the scene, which was a god-send. Kim is a licensed vocational nurse (LVN). They parked near the wreckage and ran to the Diamante. She had her husband keep Neal’s airway open, while she gave Brandon CPR, hoping to revive him. They kept Neal alive until paramedics arrived.

“I have no memory of the accident itself,” he said, when asked to recall what had happened. “In fact, I don’t remember much about the two hours before the crash. I was told at one time I’d be lucky to remember anything about the two days leading up to my mishap.”

Neal survived the horrendous crash, as did 11-year-old Jesse. Breana and Brandon, however, were killed instantly.

Neal was in a coma when a HALO Flight took him to Corpus Christi’s Spohn Memorial Hospital at 1720 with serious injuries. His son, Jesse, meanwhile, had been transported to Citizens Hospital in Victoria, Texas, about 20 minutes earlier. Jesse had one cut to the back of his head that required a single staple. He also had a small cut and a chemical burn to the inner bicep.

Texas state troopers tried to find information about Jesse and his family, but, with Neal in a coma,



This pre-mishap photo shows Neal's son, Jesse (behind), along with Brandon and Breana, the two who died in the crash.

the left side and one on the right) and five hemorrhages. His body was hurting, but he still didn't know about the deaths of his beloved son and daughter. That pain would come later.

The doctors and nurses at Spohn Memorial Hospital patched up Neal and sent him by Life Flight to Brook Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas. The staff there kept him in a medicinal coma to evaluate his condition, to operate, and to let him heal. He spent 10 weeks in that facility.

"The doctors told my mother I wouldn't be the same Neal she had known just two weeks earlier," said Petty Officer Beard. "They said I probably wouldn't walk or talk. I had an eight on the Glasgow coma scale, which is just inside the severe range. The doctors did well, and I fought through it. However, I can't take the credit because I have no doubt that God healed my brain."

"We prayed that he'd recover," said Linda Smith, Neal's mother, "and, in time, he did. I'm terribly thankful to the truckers, passersby, EMTs, and especially the nurses and doctors at Corpus Christi and Brook Army Medical Center. They saved my son. I also am thankful to Chaplain Moreno at Corpus Christi for his help and to the Navy in general for their tremendous support."

Neal stayed in that drug-induced coma until Nov. 10, and he didn't find out his children had died until Nov. 26. At that point, his family, specifically his two brothers-in-law, already had buried Breana and Brandon. They made a DVD so Neal could see the funeral and burial.

Petty Officer Beard had three skin grafts and a "flap," or plastic-surgery procedure. He also faced 13 weeks of physical therapy and 11 weeks of neuro-cognitive therapy, as well as dental work and other outpatient care. He spent 30 more days on convalescent leave. Neal lost 355 workdays, and the hospital bills

they were stumped. An emergency-contact list, part of a family-care plan, had been inside the vehicle, but it was tossed out during the mishap. Jesse did mention a family member from Oklahoma, and, with only that information, an officer called the Oklahoma State Police. Trooper Duane Miller took the call and pondered what to do next with such little data.

As luck would have it, fellow trooper Nick Green just had left a church event and decided to call the office to see what was happening. He was told about the accident in Texas and subsequent search for a Coast family living in Oklahoma. Nick knew an Eddie Coast, who turned out to be the father-in-law of Neal Beard's sister. Once notified, the Coast family immediately left to get Jesse and to see Neal.

Petty Officer Beard lay in the hospital with several pelvic fractures, a collapsed lung, pneumonia, a full thickness burn at the LUE (left, upper extremity), and a neck fracture at C2. He was in a coma and had some brain damage—seven contusions (six on



Petty Officer Beard as he lay in an ICU after his crash.

friends, families and shipmates also suffered through this loss and the long recovery of a dedicated father and Sailor.

Neal's physical wounds have healed, except for a nagging problem with his elbow and a few other issues. "I improve a little every day," he said. "However, I have a two-to-three degree loss of motion in my elbow. I can't write very well now because it's painful. I also can't run because of dexterity and heart-rate problems, and I have a slight loss of hand-eye coordination." *[Neal has been working hard to overcome these challenges and, as of May 25, 2005, was able to run 1.5 miles in 14 minutes.—Ed.]*

The emotional scars will last a lifetime, and it's hard for Neal to talk about that part of the healing process. He moves on, though, because Jesse still needs him. In fact, they need each other. "If you lose a parent, they call you an orphan," Neal said, pausing slightly. "If you lose a spouse, they call you a widow. But, there's no name for the loss of a child."

This incident, like so many other private motor-vehicle (PMV) mishaps, was preventable. In FY04, the Navy and Marine Corps lost 119 people in PMV crashes. We lost at least 10 of them because of fatigue, but that number could be higher. Data isn't always available in mishap reports, so it's hard to determine the real value. That number, though, compares to 20 people lost in alcohol-related mishaps and 10 who died without seat belts. ■

and other costs totaled \$763,600, but these losses pale in comparison to losing his two young children.

Jesse spent just one night in the hospital and recovered quickly. He occasionally talks about his late brother and sister—he was closest to his brother. He often tells his dad that Brandon would have liked this toy or that game. Jesse also remembers a small detail about that fateful trip. "Dad, you know it was Breana's turn to sit up front," he said. "But, when you were going to pull over and let us switch, I said we could wait because she was asleep—that's why I wasn't in the back."

Neal was cleared of any negligence or wrongdoing; however, he lives with the fact he was the one responsible for the deaths of his two children. Neal and Jesse dearly miss Breana and Brandon. Their

It was tough for DC1(SW) Neal Beard to share this story and to relive such a horrific incident. He bared his heart and soul to make us all think before we get in our cars or climb on our motorcycles. His story reminds us that a PMV mishap reaches beyond the victim; it affects everyone—from family, to friends, to the survivors. It also warns us of the danger from stress and cumulative sleep-deprivation. I applaud his courage and hope you will learn a lesson from his story.

On Neal's website (www.nealbeard.com), which is dedicated to his family and the mishap, he leaves a simple message: "It's not what happens to you that matters; it's what you do with it that matters." With this story, DC1(SW) Neal Beard has done a lot to help each of us.—Dan Steber