

Never Stop Learning

By Lt. J. B. Eichelbaum

There is no such thing as perfection—no matter what your endeavor, you'll always have room for improvement. This story is about the dangerous thrill many young Sailors and Marines get from speed, pushing the limits, and everything else U.S. Navy sales pitches promise.

I bought my first motorcycle while I was in flight school at Pensacola. I first saw the bike in a McDonald's parking lot by the water. The owner was leaving the area and didn't want the fuss of moving it. He also had outgrown the 500-cc engine. It was just right for learning and beyond.

The process of obtaining a motorcycle learner's permit barely required any studying at all. My first rides were on a small, empty street in Perdido Key, Fla., where I once or twice scared myself at intersections or

in gravel but managed not to fall or to get hit. I trained myself to the point that I could ride to the motorcycle-safety course and learn proper techniques. I stumbled through the course, got a passing score, and received my license.

I then transferred to Norfolk, where I was able to ride in the HOV lane. I got economical gas mileage and became a proficient rider. As my confidence grew, though, so did my ego. One day while returning to Norfolk from Virginia Beach, someone passed me on a speed bike. He taunted me to race him. I knew I couldn't keep up, but I wanted to open the throttle a bit.

I topped 95 mph—fast enough for me. With concrete zipping by only a few feet below, I had a huge adrenaline rush—that is, until I saw the flashing lights



MOTOR-VEHICLE ACCIDENTS

behind me. I figured I was going to jail. The officer said he was glad he caught me this way, as opposed to scraping me off the highway. I was relieved when he let me go. His comments and the possible embarrassment of incarceration made a big impact on me.

When my first sea-duty orders came in for Point Mugu, Calif., I was excited about a lot of things but mostly riding. The base is located north of Los Angeles and is the ideal starting point for endless coastal highways and switchback canyon roads. My plan was to stay away from cities because I felt other drivers were more dangerous than cliffs—I could control my actions but not theirs. After a year in California, those concerns began to subside, and I decided to ride to LA to see my wife play in a softball tournament.

I rode my motorcycle along the breathtaking, 70-mile coastal drive from base, through Malibu, to my wife's game. Along the way, I noticed the rear brake felt a bit spongy and made a mental note to have it checked. When I reached I-10 in Santa Monica, I sped up to freeway cruising speed.

I wasn't used to riding on the crowded freeways of

I had taken, nothing could deter my bad reactions on the front brake and spongy rear brake. The bike bucked and flipped end-over-end.

Since the car ahead of me had stopped for no reason—in typical LA fashion—it resumed speed, and I didn't hit it. I fell off the bike on my left knee and started sliding. My helmet, gloves and boots prevented major injury in the tumble, and that awful vest saved me from getting run over as I careened down the highway. My cell phone was destroyed, my jacket and jeans were torn, and I was scraped, bruised and badly shaken, but I was alive, and nothing was broken. Picking up the motorcycle, I walked it off the freeway, took a few deep breaths, and got back on to ride to the game only about a mile away.

I later learned I shouldn't have gotten back on the bike. In shock and with diminished senses, I could have caused another accident. The safety lessons I'd learned up to that accident saved my life. Unfortunately, you never can know everything. Foolishly, I had decided to learn California's unique motorcycle laws and driving rules through the school of hard knocks.

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LA, so I was careful to stay aware of my surroundings. I kept four seconds behind the cars in front of me as I had learned in my safety course, and I even was wearing the retro-reflective vest required on base. It's legal in California to ride between lanes, but I wasn't comfortable yet with that law. I didn't realize this option is provided so motorcyclists can escape dangerous situations.

My exit was a quarter-mile away, across three lanes of I-10 and I-405 interchange merging traffic. I was going 50 mph in the right lane when the car in front of me stopped quickly. Even with all the safety measures

I should have read some books, checked the Internet, and reviewed the California Highway Patrol Motorcyclists manual, which would have provided me with more options when I needed them.

I learned my lesson by trying something new in a new environment. Most mistakes already have been made. Find out what they are, and proceed on your mission with caution. 

Lt. Eichelbaum flies with VAW-117.

For information on motor-vehicle safety visit:
<http://www.safetycenter.navy.mil/ashore/motorvehicle/>—Ed.