

# Trains:

## Why You Should Stay



Story by Rich Gent,  
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Photos courtesy of Operation Lifesaver, Inc.

Someone in the United States is killed or seriously injured in a train-vehicle or train-pedestrian collision every 100 minutes. That's about the time it takes to read this article, take care of some business, and make a head call. Moreover, you are 40 times more likely to die in a train-vehicle collision than in a wreck with another car or truck. A train hitting a vehicle is like placing a soda can under the tire of your car and driving over it.

If you don't pay attention to railroad-warning devices, you have a strong possibility of suffering the same fate as a Sailor you read about in the fall 2001 issue of *Ashore* (see "A Night of Drinking Turns Deadly," pg. 4). I regret not writing this article earlier; if I had, that Sailor might be alive today.

You'll find I don't use the word "accident" anywhere in this article. Train collisions are not accidents. Webster defines an "accident" as "a happening that is not expected, foreseen or intended." If you walk down the middle of railroad tracks, you reasonably can foresee a confrontation with a train. The same holds true if you drive around crossing gates.

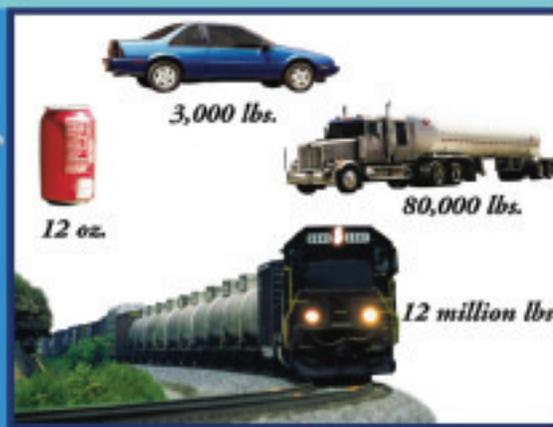
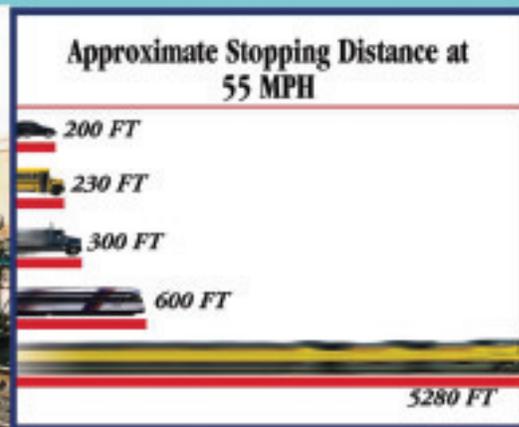
How does this happen? People simply don't understand the dangers of railroads, nor do they condition themselves to expect a run-in with a train.

Military personnel are required to move and travel extensively as part of their duties. They'll likely deal with trains at home and abroad. During a command indoctrination, I was talking with a new arrival from a large, eastern, metropolitan city about the dangers of railroads in a rural environment. I explained that most of the local crossings don't have red, flashing lights, bells and crossing arms.

This young Sailor looked at me and said, "What do you mean, they don't have red, flashing lights?" He didn't realize some crossings only have an "X"—with no active warnings. A nighttime drive by this Sailor could have ended in tragedy.

More than 50 percent of the collisions occur when people drive their cars into the sides of trains during daylight, with red, flashing lights activated and the train moving less than 30 mph. In most cases, the victims live close to the crash site.

Here are some other facts you need to con-



# out of Their Way

sider when dealing with railroad crossings and tracks:

- An average freight train (not a heavy coal or grain train) takes more than a mile to stop completely—that's the length of 18 football fields (*see chart top left*). A train crew can't even see you from a mile away.

- The average freight train weighs more than 6,000 tons, or 12 million pounds (*see graphic top right*). That's like having a destroyer coming at you about 55 mph.

- There's an optical illusion associated with a moving train. It's like trying to judge the speed of a giant C-5A transport aircraft or a commercial airliner (*see photo top middle*). The airplane looks like it's moving slowly because it's so big; the same principle applies to trains, which are the size of a two-story house.

- Trains overhang the rails by 3 feet on either side (*see photo right*). If you're dumb enough to stand next to the tracks, consider this: Things like metal straps and chains occasionally break during shipment and hang off the sides of freight cars. How do you think it would feel to be slapped in the face with a chain or thin, metal strap moving at 55 mph?

- Train tracks are private property. It's illegal to walk on them or on the maintenance or access roads next to the tracks. You can get a ticket or be fined for walking on or near tracks. Modern trains are very quiet—it's not like the old days of steam when you could hear a train coming a long way off. A train today can be on top of you before you realize it, so stay off, stay away, and stay alive.



- Some people put things on tracks and think it's OK because they've heard their parents and friends say they did it. Consider this reality, though: A small girl nearly died when a penny someone had placed on the tracks shot from under the wheels of a passing train and hit her in the chest.

Tracks are only for trains—nothing or no one else. Help your shipmates by spreading the word during quarters, or have your safety officer arrange for a free presentation by the rail-safety awareness program called Operation Lifesaver. This is a non-profit group whose mission is to reduce or eliminate collisions on railroad property.

All 50 states have coordinators who would be willing to set up a presentation for your next ship, squadron or staff general-military training. If you're interested, go to the Operation Lifesaver, Inc. web page at [www.oli.org](http://www.oli.org), look up your state, and contact the coordinator. ■