

# A Rude Awakening

By Ken Testorff

That's what a Marine corporal got when the car in which he was riding while asleep slammed into a guardrail, became airborne, and rolled across an interstate highway.

"If only I had worn my seat belt," the corporal probably said afterward, as he nursed injuries to his head, back, shoulder, and foot. He's lucky, considering he was ejected from the vehicle's rear seat. Instead of his only spending 12 days in a hospital and another 30 days on convalescent leave, family members could have been burying him.

A pregnant, civilian passenger (also not wearing a seat belt) in the rear seat with the Marine suffered severe injuries and lapsed into a coma. Doctors were unable to save her unborn twins. Meanwhile, the driver—the woman's son—walked away from the mishap.

Here's what happened. The three had left a Marine Corps base around 0045 and were driving south on the interstate. About 0110, the driver fell asleep at the wheel and swerved left, hitting a guardrail. The crash caused the driver's air bag to deploy, awakening him. The upward force the guardrail exerted on the car sent it rolling right. It then became airborne and rolled, tossing out the corporal and the woman. It came to rest upright on the opposite side of the road, facing north.

Why did this mishap occur? Fatigue. With both passengers asleep in the rear seat, no one noticed the driver was getting drowsy. Despite the late hour, no buddy system was in place. Someone besides the driver always needs to stay awake and watch for the telltale signs of fatigue. These signs include head nodding, eyes closing, and a tendency to wander out of your lane. It's easier to detect these signs from the front-passenger seat.



Photo by David J. Reimer, Sr.

Something else that could have changed the outcome of this mishap is seat belts. If both rear-seat passengers had been wearing them, they likely wouldn't have been ejected and injured so badly. Analysis of the wrecked car showed the rear-seat area mostly was intact. (*Note: As outlined in the recently revised MCO 1500.19E, Marines are **required** to wear seat belts any time they drive or ride in a motor vehicle, on or off base. If they don't, they're subject to punitive action under the Uniform Code of Military Justice.*)

Another important matter that could have affected the outcome of this mishap is operational risk management. Simply stated, there was none in this case. If there had been, it would have been obvious the risks involved of three tired people making a late-night drive far outweighed the benefits to be gained. ♦