

Taming the No. 1 Killer

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After 30 years of motorcycling and 25 years of naval service, I feel blessed to still be a part of this great Navy. Most mornings I get up, wheel my motorcycle out of the garage, and give it the once-over. (The relationship between motorcyclists and their bikes usually is special, and I'm no different.)

I turn on the fuel and pull out the choke, then check to ensure the bike is in neutral and start the engine, allowing it to warm up. During that process, I put on my riding jacket and riding glasses, insert my earplugs (highway-riding wind and noise tend to give me earaches), and don my DOT-approved helmet. One last check of the bike, and it's off to work—I do love to ride.

As a motorcycle rider stationed at the Naval Safety Center, I see too many messages and reports about injured and killed motorcyclists. It should come as no surprise that the No. 1 killer of Sailors and Marines is motor vehicles, with motorcycles a strong contributor. The ratio of accidents to motorcycle riders is unacceptable.

When we analyze the data from our many mishap reports and look for common causal factors contributing to so many motorcycle fatalities, we find they usually involve safe riders. For a few seconds, though, these riders lose situational awareness and become a statistic. The serious accidents happen with a little showing off here, hot-dogging there, or trying to look cool in front of friends. How do we address this serious problem?

Regulations already are in place, requiring every active-duty motorcyclist to complete the Motorcycle Rider Course, whether riding on or off base. This course is given free of charge on most bases. Also, active-duty Sailors and Marines are required to wear PPE both on and off base at all times.

Should we maybe ban Sailors and Marines from riding motorcycles? Sound too far-fetched to happen? To quote ESPN's Lee Corso, "Not so



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fast, my friend." That's an often-heard cry of many non-motorcycle-riding researchers. So, how do we make motorcycling safer and protect our riding privileges?

The way I see it, the key to enjoyable and safe motorcycling is confidence. We need to have confidence in our machines, our handling skills, our risk awareness, and our ability to read and react properly to developing traffic and road-hazard situations.

I can hear you now—"I can do that. I've been to the Motorcycle Rider Course. I always wear my helmet and other safety equipment." Well, my friend, knowledge is power, but knowledge isn't enough. Having knowledge and applying it to the right situation at the right time is "real power."

We can have the most beautiful and technologically advanced motorcycle in the world, but, without the rider, it's just a pretty piece of machinery. Unless knowledge is applied, the most educated motorcycle rider, wearing the best technologically advanced protective equipment, will end up just as dead as the moron who wipes out wearing shorts, flip-flops, and no helmet while going 110 on a wet pavement.

I ride for enjoyment. Accidents are not enjoyable. Why do you ride? Think about your bike, all your protective equipment, and where you ride, then ask yourself these questions:

- Am I applying safety knowledge?
- What risks am I willing to accept?

Be safe and keep the shiny side up. ➡

The author was assigned to the Naval Safety Center when he wrote this article.