

Use Your Noggin— You Only Get One

By Ken Testorff,
Naval Safety Center

I only could shake my head in disbelief when I read the mishap report about a 35-year-old CPO who died in a motorcycle crash. "Here was a guy who should have known better," I thought.

The report said the chief had a BAC of 0.213 when he lost control of his bike and slammed into a tree. He was riding with no helmet (OK by law in the state where he was but not OK by Navy standards) and with no valid motorcycle license. No one knows for sure what his level of riding experience was. His next of kin only could offer, "He had ridden motorcycles for a while."

Moments after reading that depressing account, I came across an item about a young college senior who was about to graduate and join the Navy, a dream he'd had since age 16. He just had aced the officer-candidate exam and, according to a relative, "was going to fly fighter planes. He loved to go fast," she said.

That passion for going fast got the wannabe aviator into trouble while riding city streets with a friend on the back of his powerful motorcycle. The helmetless 24-year-old hit a curb and then a sign. He was pronounced dead at the scene. His passenger, a 21-year-old woman, also wasn't wearing a helmet but somehow escaped remarkably unscathed.



The southwestern state where this tragedy occurred has laws requiring seat belts in cars and helmets for bicycle riders, but, as in the case of the CPO, it has no law requiring motorcyclists over 21 to wear helmets. A mandatory helmet law had been passed in the state in 1989, and deaths had begun decreasing almost immediately. By 1996, only 10 percent of 115 fatalities involved helmetless riders.

The law was repealed in 1997, though, after intense pressure from lobbying motorcyclists, and fatalities jumped right back up. By 1999, 60 percent of the state's 181 fatalities weren't wearing helmets. Nevertheless, advocates for no hel-

metals still defend their position. "You would take all the enjoyment out of it (motorcycle riding)," one insisted. "Besides, I'd rather be dead than crippled."

Nationally, motorcycle fatalities, decreasing since 1990, started rising again in 1997. That year, a motorcyclist was 14 times more likely to die in a crash than someone in a car. By 2001, that likelihood had escalated to 26 times.

Motorcycle riders and dealers point out that more people are riding bikes today, which means more people are likely to be in accidents. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, street-bike sales have increased 91 percent

since 1997. But officials and riders see more trends that help account for the rise in deaths.

As one rider noted, "Guys are buying bikes that are way too big and fast for them. These bikes shouldn't be on the street, they're so fast—they can go upward of 180 miles per hour—much less be ridden by someone with little experience."

Indeed, the average motorcycle engine, says the NHTSA, has increased from an average of 769 cc in 1990 to 959 cc in 2001, a jump of nearly 25 percent. A former employee of a motorcycle dealership said he quit because he couldn't stand watching powerful bikes being sold to novice riders. The difference, he said, is like "shooting a BB gun vs. shooting an AK-47. I made good money, but some things are more important than money."

According to police reports, several people who died last year were riding those large, fast bikes. Traffic detectives agree bigger bikes ridden by less-experienced riders have contributed to fatalities. But they quickly point out that intoxica-

tion, speeding, a lack of safety training, and a lack of helmets have added to the deadly mix.

Riding a motorcycle is an inherently dangerous pastime—there's little disagreement on that statement. "When you're on a motorcycle, you just don't have any protection," said a police sergeant. "Even with a helmet, there's still a great deal of trauma to the body."

There are ways to mitigate these dangers. One of the most effective is a motorcycle safety-training course like the one the Navy has (required for all Navy people operating a motorcycle or riding one as a passenger, on or off base). Graduates of the course usually don't have as many serious accidents as those who don't. Even those who think they know how to ride are surprised at how much they learn. ■

The hard part is getting people to keep practicing what they learn in the Navy's Motorcycle Rider Course. Consider the following example.

Navy Woman Dies in Motorcycle Crash

By Ken Testorff,
Naval Safety Center

Fatal motorcycle mishaps involving Navy and Marine Corps women are rare. However, Naval Safety Center statistics show that 18 have occurred since 1982. In eight of these cases, operators were killed; the remaining casualties were passengers. Here is a breakdown of the total fatalities to date:

1982 – 1
1984 – 2
1985 – 4
1986 – 2
1987 – 1
1988 – 2
1991 – 3
1993 – 1
1998 – 1
2004 – 1

The latest statistic was added Jan. 1, 2004. A 37-year-old Navy lieutenant was out riding her motorcycle with some friends at 0130 when she



lost control, slid into oncoming traffic, and collided with a Jeep. The highway-patrol report lists "unsafe speed for the current road conditions" as the cause of the crash. She died of injuries to the lower part of her body.

According to the investigating officer, the victim was wearing a helmet, leather jacket and jeans. That PPE, however, doesn't meet all the