



Naval Safety Center

LESSONS LEARNED



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FATIGUED DRIVING

You've likely seen the "Don't be that guy" memes covering various situations on your favorite social media sites. As travel restrictions slowly ease and you pack your bags for holiday or liberty travels, we don't want to add another situation to the list. Don't be the one who fails to plan the journey, takes unnecessary risks, and doesn't make it back. You may not know the exact moment when sleep overtakes you; it sneaks up on you. Falling asleep at the wheel is dangerous (*obviously*), but being sleepy affects your ability to drive safely even if you don't fall asleep.



Based upon police reports, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimates there are about 100,000 drowsy-driving related crashes annually in the United States, including more than 71,000 injuries and 1,550 fatalities. However, the real number may be much higher, because it's difficult to determine whether a driver was drowsy at the time of a crash. A study by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety estimated that 328,000 drowsy-driving crashes occur annually, with 109,000 injuries and about 6,400 fatalities. The researchers suggest that drowsy-driving deaths are more than 350% greater than accounted for in the police reports!¹ According to our Navy/Marine database, there were 489 reported instances of fatigued-driving related fatalities, serious injuries, and property damage involving Marines and Sailors in the past five years.

The following examples of poor (*or no*) planning were easy to find in our database (*there are many*). Please read and educate yourself, your unit, and your family on the extreme risks of fatigued driving.

- Two service members were involved in a single-vehicle accident when their car went off the roadway into a culvert, then struck two trees. The driver was pronounced dead at the scene. The passenger sustained serious injuries and was airlifted to the hospital. The report indicates that the driver likely fell asleep at the wheel.
- A service member was driving from his duty station to his home for the weekend when his car slid off the road and rolled over multiple times, killing him. At the time of the accident, the service member had driven six and a half hours, immediately following a full workday on a Friday following an underway period.
- A service member was driving a long distance in the early hours of the morning to make it to duty-section muster on time. After a short time, he "became fatigued," according to the report. He veered, collided with a concrete barrier, and sustained a sprained ankle. While this member's car was totaled, he was fortunate to sustain only a minor injury (*it's almost a miracle*). His seven days on limited duty was a small price to pay for a potentially fatal crash.



- A service member was returning from home after a 72-hour liberty when he lost control of his car, hit a barrier, and rolled over several times. He did not survive. While the cause was undetermined, the fact that the accident happened at 0130 hours is strong evidence that fatigue may have been a factor.
- Two junior Sailors were driving across the country on their first day of pre-deployment leave. After driving for 10 straight hours, they came across an object on the road. In an effort to avoid the object, the driver lost control of the vehicle and collided with an oncoming 18-wheeler. Both occupants were pronounced dead at the scene.

¹ Source: The National Safety Council; <https://www.nsc.org/road-safety/safety-topics/fatigued-driving>

- Two Sailors were headed back home from a nearby city a few hours away. They started the drive around 0100. After about an hour, both the driver and the passenger became drowsy. At approximately 0200, they both fell asleep. The passenger awoke just seconds before reaching a left curve in the road. Realizing the driver was also asleep, he attempted to grab the steering wheel to avoid hitting a concrete safety barrier on the interstate's outside shoulder. Fortunately, the passenger prevented them from hitting the barrier head-on. The car slid along the barrier instead, and both Sailors walked away with minor back soreness. This preventable accident was inches and seconds from being fatal.

Key Takeaways / Lessons Learned

Do the above scenarios sound familiar? Driving long distances after a deployment and driving through the night to make it back to work on time are common themes. You may have heard the stories of the epic road trip, or perhaps you've pushed the limits yourself. Too often, fatigue is a causal factor in auto accidents involving Sailors and Marines. These accidents can be avoided with a few simple preventive measures before and during trips. Before you get behind the wheel, read and heed:

- Plan your trip. It is the 21st century folks, and there are many apps that you can use to plan your stops and book hotels along your route.
- Use the Travel Risk Planning System (TRiPS) to assess the hazards you may encounter on your trip. You can download the "Naval Safety Center—Traffic Safety" guide from the SAFECEN App to access TRiPS. You can plan your route, and get a risk assessment and tips on how to travel safely.
- Get enough sleep! Most adults need at least seven hours of sleep a day, while teens need at least eight hours. Remember - Heavy drinking the night before you drive does not provide quality sleep.
- **Do not drink alcohol** or take medications that make you sleepy. Be sure to check the label on any medications or talk to your pharmacist.
- The Safety and Occupational Health Program OPNAVINST 5100.23 directs a maximum driving time of 11 hours in a 24-hour period while on official duty. For off-duty travel, follow host-nation, federal, or state guides that may exist regarding maximum driving time.

Note: Turning up the radio, singing aloud, or opening the window will not be enough to keep you alert. Those actions might help you feel more alert, but the effects last only a short time and may give you a false sense that you can keep going.

Know the warning signs of fatigue. If you experience any of these warning signs, pull over to rest or change drivers:

- Yawning or blinking frequently.
- Difficulty remembering the past few miles driven.
- Missing your exit.
- Drifting from your lane.
- Hitting a rumble strip on the side of the road.



As you drive home for some R&R and return to your duty station afterward, take your Operational Risk Management mindset with you. ORM isn't a checklist and it isn't just for on-duty. We've said it before, "Mayhem doesn't care about your duty status," so use it whenever you're planning a long journey, and hey, put the phone away! (*That's a topic for another lesson*). Don't become another mishap statistic in our database, the Marine Corps and Navy need you to be safe and well, both on duty and off.

This product is posted on the NAVSAFECEN CAC-enabled website at <https://intelshare.intelink.gov/sites/navsafe>, and on the public website at <https://navalsafetycenter.navy.mil/Safety-Promotions/Lessons Learned>.

And remember, let's be careful out there...