



Naval Safety Center

LESSONS LEARNED



LL 21-32

DRIVING SAFETY

Sailors and Marines often work and train in very high-risk environments, yet automobile accidents cause more fatalities among our service members than any other mishap category. Motorcycle fatalities are second, so if you're a rider, check out our lesson learned LL 21-15, Motorcycle Mishaps. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimated that 20,160 people died in motor vehicle crashes in the first half of 2021, an increase of 18.4 percent from 2020. In the Naval services, off-duty automobile crash fatalities rose to 38 in 2021, up from 23 in 2020, a 65 percent increase. We know what you're thinking, "that's because so many of us were teleworking during 2020." Fair enough, but automobile crash fatalities in 2021 were also higher than in 2019 at 27. In fact, 2021 saw the most fatal automobile accidents since 2013. Whatever the stats, any number of fatalities is too many.



Please read and share the following examples of preventable automobile mishaps with your team and your family. While some are merely hard, painful lessons, others are tragic. All were preventable.

- At Least He Didn't Kill Someone. Two Sailors were at a club drinking and eventually left in Sailor 1's car. Some of those in attendance attempted to stop Sailor 1 from driving, but apparently, they didn't try hard enough. Sailor 1 was driving with a BAC of .19 when he impacted a tree, ejecting Sailor 2 from the vehicle. Sailor 2 suffered severe injuries, including a broken hip and arms, a spinal cord injury, complete loss of motor function below the waist and partial loss of motor function of his arms. Sailor 1 suffered only minor injuries to his orbital socket, but has little recollection of the event. Sailor 2 required multiple surgeries and is now permanently disabled. — *Apparently, we still need to say it: Don't drink and drive. Period.*
- Heads Up. A Sailor was driving on an interstate and rear-ended another car. The Sailor admitted that they took their eyes off the road and looked down, according to the report. Due to the impact of the vehicle, the airbag deployed, hitting the Sailor in the shoulder. Fortunately for this distracted Sailor, they only required 24 hours sick in quarters (SIQ) to recover. — *It could've ended up much worse. Eyes on the road, folks! The NHTSA reported that seven percent of all fatal crashes in 2019 were distraction-related. That's just the fatal events. Distractions (calls, texts, and others) result in somewhere between 40 – 50% of total crashes (studies vary).*
- Mama, I'm Not Coming Home. A Sailor departed from somewhere in Florida at approximately 0630 and was headed home to somewhere in New England. The Sailor stopped to rest at noon for 30 minutes and again at 1900 for approximately 1 hour (*good intentions, but*). Shortly after entering Maryland, the Sailor drove off the highway and hit a tree. They didn't remember events leading up to the crash, but recalled waking up after at approximately 2030 and being unable to exit the car due to their injuries. The Sailor suffered torso and spine injuries resulting in permanent partial disability. — *Making a 740-mile trip alone in one day is just asking for trouble. Even with a couple of rest breaks, that's just too far to attempt in one day. See your command about using the Travel Risk Planning System (TRiPS) before you travel.*
- No Need For Speed. A Marine was traveling northbound on the interstate when he "crashed into the back of a semi-truck while speeding," according to the report. Due to a traumatic brain injury (TBI) from the impact, the Marine has no memories of pre and post-event occurrences. The report doesn't mention the extent of the Marine's injuries, but a TBI with memory loss isn't a good sign. — *We've said this before, "being in a hurry only gets you to the emergency room faster." Slow it down, please.*

- This Isn't "Fast And Furious 10". A Sailor was driving with two of his buddies on base when he approached a curve in the road. While he was driving the speed limit at that moment, he "thought it would be fun" to accelerate through the curve, according to the report. About halfway through the curve, (*and unsurprisingly*), the driver started to feel the vehicle lose control. He estimated his speed to be 55 to 60 MPH (*insert face-palm emoji here*). He attempted to regain control but was unable to and slammed on the brakes. That's when, well, here's the list: The car did not stop and continued onto the curb and into the grassy area; the car struck the concrete base of a light post with the left rear quarter panel; the vehicle started to rotate, striking a turnstile gate with the front driver-side hood and bumper; it continued to rotate and struck a metal bollard filled with concrete with the rear passenger side door, finally coming to a stop (*whew!*) The driver and front-seat passenger suffered minor injuries, but the back seat passenger suffered head trauma, a fractured eye socket and a fractured wrist, and has a permanent partial disability. — *Save the drifting for your video game console, please.*
- At The Crossroads. While driving home in the rain, a Marine approached an intersection where the cross-traffic did not have a stop sign. While technically not speeding, the Marine was traveling too fast for the weather conditions and misjudged the stopping distance required on the wet street. His car hydroplaned past the stop sign and into the intersection, where another car approaching from the left could not stop and struck his car on the driver's side. The Marine was unresponsive at the scene and was transported to the local emergency room. He suffered severe head trauma, including brain damage and was in a coma at the time of the report. — *Speed limits are the **maximum** speed allowed. Please, PLEASE, slow it down in the rain. It saves you and those around you.*
- How to make sure you crash. A Sailor was driving **late at night** (0030), **in the rain**, and traveling at approximately **50 MPH in a 35 MPH zone**. While attempting to negotiate **a curve in the road**, the Sailor lost control of the car, hit a curb (*as one does when speeding around a curve at night in the rain*), which overturned the car. — *This lucky Sailor was treated and released from the emergency room with only minor injuries; most likely thanks to his seatbelt and not his risk management skills. Please learn from his choices. See our speed comments in the previous example.*

Key Takeaways/Lessons Learned

For tips on cold weather driving, see the fall and winter safety presentation on the NAVSAFECEN website at the link at the bottom of the page in the "Stand Down" section. In the meantime, here are a few reminders to get you started.

- 1. It's Not The Autobahn...Slow Down.** At least four of the seven examples in this lesson learned could have been avoided by merely slowing down. According to the National Safety Council, speeding was a cause of 26 percent of all fatal automobile accidents in 2019. That number includes speeds too fast for weather and road conditions, not just exceeding the speed limit. Slow down and give yourself more room to stop and avoid the vehicles in front of you if needed.
- 2. Seatbelts, People, Seatbelts.** Some of the lessons learned injuries could likely have been much worse if the drivers and passengers weren't wearing seat belts. And the Sailor who was ejected from the car likely wouldn't have been if he'd been wearing one. Why do we mention seat belts? The report by the NHTSA noted that, in addition to speeding, non-use of seat belts is higher now than in pre-COVID 19 pandemic times. Please buckle up.
- 3. Eyes Forward.** You may have seen our video series on distracted driving highlighting all the things not to do while driving. There are many. Reaction times vary based on multiple factors, but *if you're looking down, your reaction time is never*. If you don't see it, you're not reacting.
- 4. Drive Sober.** For the millennials in the group, this one is the "OG" of things not to drink and do (*that's "original" for the rest of us*). Twenty-eight percent of all traffic fatalities involve alcohol, according to the NHTSA. Don't do it ... period.

And remember ... "Let's be careful out there"