



Motorcycle Mishaps VI

This year's motorcycle riding season is upon us, a time of revving up the engine and feeling the wind in our faces as we cruise down the highway. Every year, on an all-too-regular schedule, avoidable mishaps take their toll on the naval enterprise's readiness by reducing the workforce, either temporarily or permanently, with potentially avoidable mishaps.

Reviewing past reports in the Risk Management Information system gives us valuable insight into the specific accidents taking our service members out of the fight. However, even with detailed data on when and how these incidents typically occur, individual crashes remain unpredictable and are ultimately driven by real-time circumstances.

Over the past three fiscal years, both the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Marine Corps have experienced rising fatality rates. Navy fatalities remained stable at 23 during both FY23 and FY24 before increasing to 30 in FY25, with 10 additional fatalities recorded eight months into the current fiscal year. The Marine Corps demonstrated a steady upward trend over the same period, with fatalities doubling from six in FY23 to 12 in FY24, rising to 15 in FY25, and reaching eight so far in the current fiscal year.

The Naval Safety Command looks for ways to help reduce the number of mishaps we have each season by looking at the causal factors and providing ways to protect our motorcycle enthusiasts through the spring and riding year that follows. Keep in mind as we discuss numbers of reported mishaps, we can be fairly certain there's an unknown number of mishaps that weren't reported, so the overall numbers are probably higher.

Driver Inattentiveness - Worth Your Attention

Collisions with other motor vehicles have a large presence in motorcycle-related mishaps both in the United States and overseas. A service member was riding to the base to attend morning muster with their unit. As the service member approached an intersection, a civilian SUV, traveling from the opposite direction, turned left into the motorcyclists' path, impacting the front left portion of the motorcycle. When the rider attempted to avoid a collision by changing course onto the shoulder, they hit the crosswalk sign, and were ejected from the bike.

This is a tragic mishap in which the service member was not at fault but still ended up paying the ultimate price for someone else's mistake. The SUV driver was cited for "Failure to Yield to a Right-of-Way Vehicle" and "Inattentiveness," which were primary contributing factors to the collision. The service member's estimated speed matched the posted speed limit for the area (50 MPH). Despite technically doing everything "right," the service member died because of another driver's inattentiveness.

Unexpected Hazards

Overturn and/or rollover mishap events take a large toll on our riding community. A service member with years of riding experience left base, travelling along his typical route. He took the same exit he normally did, but as he came over the rise, he encountered an unexpected patch of sand that had blown onto the street, presumably due to recent high winds. As he hit the sand, the tires slid in such a way that he reflexively let go of the bike and landed on the pavement. He suffered a broken/fractured clavicle and hand and was discharged with a sling.

This rider was qualified to drive a motorcycle with years of experience, wearing all required PPE and according to the mishap report, simply encountered a random, environmental hazard. This type of mishap can happen to a rider of any skill level if the riding circumstances are aligned against you. The most common denominator in this category is something on the road, whether it's sand, gravel or a wet road. The best method to keep from becoming a statistic is to watch your speed and keep your head on a swivel and be on the lookout for unexpected hazards at all times.

Keep it Between the White Lines

Another preventable threat to readiness occurs when riders lose control and leave the paved roadway. In one mishap, local authorities reported a service member was riding recklessly at approximately 65 mph in a 45 mph zone. This excessive speed caused the rider to lose control and crash. He was ejected from the motorcycle, sustained severe head and facial trauma, and was pronounced dead at the scene.



Fatigue did not play a role in this incident. The service member was operating on a routine schedule without recent shift changes or overtime, was adequately rested, and had only been awake for an hour. Furthermore, he was a newly trained rider correctly wearing all required personal protective equipment (PPE). Ultimately, a single decision to speed negated those safety preparations and cost him his life.

We regularly caution “speed kills” in our motorcycle safety dispatches and other related motorcycle safety products. It can’t be said any clearer. By continuing to reinforce the need to reduce speed and increase rider awareness of their surroundings, we aim to equip our Sailors and Marines with the knowledge required to stay out of harm’s way and reduce the frequency of these tragic mishaps.

It’s a Jungle Out There

Collisions with animals and objects OTHER than vehicles is another all-too common event impacting our readiness.

A service member found out the hard way how random nature can be when, while riding their motorcycle to work early in the morning on a dimly lit road, they rode up on a deer crossing the road. As they often do in the face of an oncoming vehicle, the deer suddenly stopped. As the rider crashed into the animal, the bike jumped the curb and the rider laid the bike down during the process of getting back on the road.

Fortunately, the rider only suffered road rash and bruised ribs.

There are an unlimited number of dangers waiting for motorcycles on a daily basis. Animals don’t take roads into consideration, so it’s up to us who use those roads to keep an eye out for anything unusual and keep our speeds to where we have time to react should there be an unexpected surprise. The time of day and dimly lit roads were major factors in the cause of this mishap. When we take time to ensure we’re doing everything possible in the prevention side of the column, we reduce risk and improve our chances of enjoying our ride.



File photo, not associated with a mishap

Key Takeaways

- 1. Training.** Riding motorcycles is a dangerous activity. Getting your license is just the first step. In addition to the mandatory Basic Rider’s Course, there are several riding courses available to continue challenging military riders to improve their riding awareness. Finding (or being) a riding mentor is another step we’re encouraging to help new riders become experienced riders (and not a statistic). Every experienced rider has pearls of wisdom with different riding areas that those with less riding experience can learn from. Let’s help each other become better riders so we can enjoy our time on the roads longer.
- 2. Expect the unexpected.** “Unpredictable” events have many ways things can go wrong. There are drivers and riders on the road with various skill levels. It all comes down to BOTH being aware of the surroundings OUTSIDE/AROUND their motorized vehicle and not being distracted. Trusting another driver’s reaction or response time should never be your main method of defensive driving. The level of caution for staying safe on the roads should reflect your preparedness and heads up mindset.
- 3. Riding resources.** More information is available online, from the Motorcycle Safety page on Naval Safety Command’s website linked [here](#), which includes links to the Rider Down publication with the latest stats and examples of mishaps taking our Sailors and Marines off the field, to the Motorcycle Safety Foundation page linked [here](#) that offers a guided structure for working your way through the different levels of motorcycle proficiency. Motorcycling is an exciting activity to get around and save gas but doing so safely is the key. Take the time to get trained, equip yourself with the required gear and head out on the roads when you’re ready to accomplish the mission safely.

And remember, “Let’s be careful out there”