

Motorcycle Safety
TSgt Julie Harlow
381 TRSS

I expect most of you to see the title and hit the delete key. The intent of this article is to serve as a reminder to people who ride, and educate the people considering the sport. This information can be a discussion point for everyone. I tell my children the smartest people are the ones that learn from another's mistakes.



I like to think I can ride. Some of my friends tell me I have a lot to learn, and I believe them. I would rather be told I have more to learn, than be told I know it all. I have learned a thing or two over the past 20 years around motorcycles, and I want to share with you the event that has affected me the most.

In the mid 1980's, I was out with my most recent bike. It was a dual-sport Kawasaki. I had previously owned and outgrew three others. About 3 o'clock on a May afternoon, I was riding at nearly 60 mph on a gravel road and was wearing my usual summer riding apparel, shorts, tennis shoes and a t-shirt. I had veered to the left side of the road to pass a young boy, who was walking to his friend's house. He turned his head, looked me square in the face and stepped directly in front of me. What many of you may be thinking now is pretty close to what I was thinking. There was varying degrees of profanity mixed in with "Dear God, don't let me kill him". In a split second decision, I yelled at him to move, put the bike into a slide and started to lay it down. What I had intended to be a low-side controlled slide did not turn out that way. I failed to see a melon-sized chunk of granite in my path. I did, luckily, miss the boy.

That rock turned a controlled situation into a very uncontrolled mess. When the rock impacted the bike's frame, I was still going fast enough that it turned my left side slide into a pancake-flip with a right side bounce, and back up onto the front rim. Again, most of you are probably thinking something similar to what I was, "Whew". I was relieved, right until it dawned on me I was heading for a 5-foot deep ditch with a blackberry bush in the bottom. At this point, my brain was kind enough to shut down for the next few seconds. As hard as it is to believe, I was really lucky that blackberry bush was there.



I walked out of the ditch, pushing my bike. The blackberry bush caught the bike, and me. The bike had a dented tank, a scratched-up front fender, and the left mirror was snapped in half. The moment I realized my bike was going to live (and my dad wasn't going to kill me) was also the same moment my sense of pain returned.

The first thing I found was the skin on the back of my left hand was shredded nearly to the elbow, and then a similar spot on my left knee. Then, I found the exhaust burn in my right calf. I quit looking after that. The more I found, the more it hurt. I was very lucky; it only took 12 hours in the emergency room to get my wounds cleaned out. If I had worn gear, I would only have the story to tell, and not the matching scars.

The lessons I learned? The biggest one was the importance of safety gear. I still ride, but with a full-face helmet, crash armor in the jacket and gloves. Long pants are a must. The other major lesson I learned was SLOW DOWN. A lower rate of speed would have given me more time to react. I knew what I could do; it was the unexpected that slapped me in the back of the head. If you're really interested, I could give you federal statistics showing 38% of all motorcycle deaths between 1993 and 2000 were speed-related.

One local rider recently looked me dead in the eye and said, "I don't like to



talk about crashes". I don't blame him. Storytelling is a tradition in the Air Force, as well as an easy way to pass on knowledge. I have found Internet pictures of a motorcycle helmet imbedded in a truck grill and of motorcycles missing more parts than were found. I have stopped other people on bikes and shown them the scars to try to get them away from wearing their shorts and shower shoes, and into proper gear.

Please, don't be a statistic, and please, please, don't go face first into a blackberry bush. Trust me, it hurts.