

Why?

I HAD CHECKED into the hospital in the morning for an outpatient surgical procedure. A small lump in my neck, under my ear, would be “better off in a bucket” as my dentist had said. Scheduled six weeks in advance, I’d had six months to worry about it.

My surgeon was bright, obviously knowledgeable and told me exactly what he’d do. But I’d also been informed, as required, what could go wrong and what side effects might linger. Thankfully, work kept me busy, so worry didn’t bother me too much, and less than a week before the date, I’d felt a sense of calm that it would be all right. That morning, my prayers went out to the operating room team, that they might all work with perfect focus.

And I won’t keep you in suspense. Everything did go as planned, I’m fine. After a week of bandages and stitches, working at home part of the time, I was back at the office.

But my roommate was another story. He’d arrived the day before after a motorcycle accident.

I’d gotten a glimpse of his legs when I got into my bed. They looked busted up pretty bad. His parents were there, and their conversation was clearly meant to be reassuring. They sounded calm, but it wasn’t hard to know how emotionally traumatized they must have been to get the call from the police. You forget how important supportive family can be at a time like this, and Sandy, my sweet wife, was my rock, as always.

In good spirits, he called out, “Who’s there?” and we introduced ourselves through the curtain that separated us. I liked him immediately. And after all the family and friends had left, we talked. Around 3 a.m., when the pain meds weren’t enough to let us sleep, we shared our stories for almost two hours.

He’d recently returned from a tour in Iraq with the US Marines, now a civilian. Between missions, the guys in his platoon would fantasize about what sportbike they would buy when they returned. He was the first to get one; paid cash for a brand-new 600; \$9300 out the door. It had less than 200 miles on it. Now it was totalled. He wasn’t sure if the insurance, which covered theft, covered accidents, too. I told him that comprehensive coverage was usually a package that covered fire, theft and collision. It should be okay.

And that was the least of his financial worries. Was he still covered by the military’s medical plan? Wasn’t it still good for 90 days? It hadn’t been quite that long.



I can’t imagine what it would all cost in the end, but just handling the mountain of paperwork would be strenuous.

His arrival had been just the opposite of mine. He’d been lifted from the dirt and rushed to the hospital, knowing no one in the ambulance or ER.

I told him what I did for a living and had to ask how it happened.

Actually, the story of the accident was particularly tragic because only one aspect of the usual high risk factors applied—inexperience and lack of training. He wasn’t drinking, it wasn’t dark or late at night or in heavy traffic.

It was around noon on a sunny day, there were no cars around, the road was broad and smooth and the curve was sweeping and unobstructed. But he envisioned a perfect sportbike moment and entered the turn too fast for his skills. The bike clipped the curb on the outside and cartwheeled him into a road sign and some Armco guard rail. Both legs were broken close to the ankles. A handlebar punctured his side.

His top-of-line helmet had saved his life and his face, and his gloves had saved his hands. But he hadn’t been wearing a jacket and the skin on his shoulder was gone in addition to large areas of road rash on his arms.

His doctor must have also been good, but I sensed his frustration to see a fine young man so needlessly damaged. He casually told my friend in the morning, “I guess I forgot to tell you, you *will* walk again.” I figured more than one motorcyclist must have been treated this way in a hospital. I’m glad I hadn’t been. My occupation was listed as just “editor.”

Clearly, the accident had been caused by inadequate riding skills. Did it have to happen, had he really been going too fast, or did he just become alarmed and focused on what he wanted to avoid? In fact, it sounded like the latter case.

Most of us who read this magazine have been riding for many years, and I confess that I find it very difficult to remember how it felt when I didn’t know how to ride. I’m reluctant to offer any personal training advice for that reason, but I’m thankful that someone like Walt Fulton (ex-racer and MCN’s former chief performance tester) would dedicate so much of his personal time to teaching (MSF courses in the past and now with Streetmasters).

Sadly, my friend’s experience has been replicated all across the country, as young men returning from the death-defying stimulation of combat try to find a way to keep some sense of it. It’s no secret that base commanders have been charged with the duty to reduce these incidents.

I’ve heard through the grapevine about an official military study that was supposed to identify the most effective training. It turned out that Lee Parks’ Total Control Advanced Riding Clinic was favored, but the report was never issued after bureaucratic pressure came from higher ups, stating that the MSF would get the job.

Would it have been good enough to prevent my friend’s injuries? That’s the only important criterion. We don’t need the MSF to sell more motorcycles if so many end up being the cause of lasting injuries, and ultimately making large groups of family and friends decide that motorcycles are just too dangerous and that riders must be crazy.

I’ve thought a lot about my friend over these last two weeks and called last night to see how he’s doing. He still hadn’t gotten home from the hospital, but was now in rehab, proud that he could actually walk on crutches with two broken legs!

His attitude is fantastic and he’s very young and will heal faster than I could. We’ll stay in touch. I said I guessed it was a little like combat, being in the hospital, every feeling was heightened and we had bonded somehow.

Why did we meet? Is anything accidental? Was it meant to show me something? Was I meant to share it with you?

Be careful out there!

DAVE SEARLE

—Dave Searle
Editor