

Motorcycles were my thing as I grew up. I raced in motorcross competitions just about every weekend and worked for the shop that sponsored me. I fell often enough to learn the hard way that my helmet, gloves, elbow and shoulder pads, boots, long-sleeved jersey, and riding pants really did work. But it wasn't until one night after I joined the Army that I learned just how important my helmet really was.

In a never ending quest for a better bike, I bought a new Yamaha 650 and ordered a full-face helmet that looked cool and worked. That cost me some money. Since I always needed more money, I figured I needed to get my sergeant stripes. To get that promotion, I needed to go to night school to further my education and gain an airframe and power plant license. Riding my motorcycle was part of that process. When I got off duty, I rode home, grabbed my books, and then headed off to school on my new bike.

All of that changed one night. As I was going down the four-lane road heading towards my house, a teenage girl who had her license less than a week came toward me from the opposite di-

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rection. She saw me coming her way, but thought the car behind her was going to rear-end her, so she turned in front of me thinking she would miss me. She didn't. Instead, she hit me head-on.

I flew over the handlebars and into her windshield. The back of my head bounced off her steering wheel, and then I was thrown face first into a telephone pole. The doctor said that if I hadn't

been wearing my full-face helmet, parts of my head would have been smashed into the windshield and the left side of my face would have been left on the pole.

I suffered a double brain concussion, and my brain swelled so badly the doctors thought they would have to drill holes in my skull to relieve the pressure. Fortunately for me, the day I was supposed to have the drilling done the swelling went down on its own.

I was in and out of consciousness for the first 4 days after the accident. I woke up long enough to say that I wasn't unconscious the whole time, but I was in a semiconscious state for the next 2 weeks. By the time I realized what was going on, close to a month had passed. Although my parents had come to see me, I didn't even know they were there. Some of my coworkers were there every day to help my wife, who basically lived in my hospital room with me, but I don't remember that either.

I spent more than 2 months in the hospital receiving physical and occupational therapy. I lost motor coordination and even had to learn how to walk again. The doctor gave me a razor and told me to shave, but

it wasn't until after I was released that I found out

the razor didn't have a blade in it. The doctors just wanted to see how good my coordination was, but they didn't trust me with a blade.

I also had a problem with my memory; I knew names and people, but that was about it. Part of my therapy was going back out to the airfield to learn stuff that I once knew. It was only after I was told what an item

was that it rang a bell and would come back to me.

I'd say, "Oh yeah, that's what that is, now tell me again what it does." Once they'd do that I'd say, "Oh yeah that's right, I remember now!"

After a little more than 2 months passed the doctor gave me a quick "test." He told me to remember three things: the number 7, ice cream, and blue sky. After he talked to me for what seemed like an hour, he asked what the three items were. Once I told him, he said I was ready to go home.

Even after being released from the hospital, the list of things I couldn't do on my profile made me feel like there was little I could do! No driving for a year, no climbing on top of aircraft, no going inside an aircraft unless the ramp was down and I could walk up it. I couldn't stand for more than 10 minutes, walk more than a mile, run, do physical training, and — for fear of blackouts — go anywhere alone. My flying and crewing days were over for the next couple of years.

It took years of hard work before I got back to normal. Well, about as normal as I will ever be. I still have some minor problems with my memory. In spite of all this, life for me is good. I am living a life that would have ended if I hadn't been wearing my helmet the night that girl turned in front of me.

You hear people argue that wearing a helmet gets in the way of their "personal freedom" or keeps them from hearing or seeing dangers around them. Well, I can tell you from experience that helmets work because I'M STILL HERE. ▶

I'm still here



Photo by SSgt Tanika Bell