



been there, done that, **Lucky** to be alive

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THE DANGERS OF  
**"HIGHWAY HYPNOSIS"**



Courtesy Photo

I had just gotten back to Seattle from a 70-day patrol in Alaska, and everyone was given 4 days off. Five if you could pay someone to stand your duty on the fifth day. I was anxious to see my girlfriend, who lived in San Diego, Calif. I whipped out my road map, and using the tried and true “string measuring system,” figured it would be a 1,250-mile drive. I calculated that I could make it in 24 hours. No big deal. I’d stood 24-hour duty before, so driving a car should be a snap. I hit the road at 1 minute past midnight. To my credit, I covered about 900 miles before my energy level dropped through the floorboards. I pulled over for a brief rest and

then drove the remaining 350 miles. As you can imagine, having driven so far I wanted to cram as much as I could into those 3 days, so I cut corners on my sleep schedule. But hey, I was young and bulletproof. I could handle it. Finally, I had to head back. I pulled out from my parents’ house at “zero-dark-early,” glad that I would at least miss the Los Angeles morning rush hour traffic. Except for gas, I didn’t stop until I hit the northern California town of Dunsuir, where I stopped for a bowl of chili. I figured that

would keep me going for awhile longer. It was nightfall, and I was now well into Oregon. As I looked ahead, I thought I saw people walking across the freeway. I slammed onto the brakes and slowed to a crawl. But when I rubbed my eyes and looked around, nobody was there. “Wow,” I thought, “was that what is called ‘highway hypnosis?’” I poured myself a cup of coffee from the thermos, determined not to fall prey to another illusion. An hour or so later I saw what I thought were the taillights of a tractor-trailer stopped

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in front of me. I hit the brakes and swerved into the left lane, but there was no tractor-trailer. The “taillights” were just some stars low on the horizon. This was getting serious, so I took the next exit and pulled off the road to get some sleep. I figured I could get in an hour-long nap and still make morning formation. I wasn’t asleep for long before a policeman shone his flashlight through the window and asked me what I was doing. Once more I headed north on the highway. I rolled down the window, hoping the cold air would keep me awake. When that didn’t work, I tried slapping my face and punching my right leg, figuring the pain would keep

me awake. It wasn’t pretty, but at least my eyes were staying open. The sun had been up for an hour or so when I passed the Seattle city limit sign. I breathed a sigh of relief. I’d made it, or so I thought. But I was wrong. Without any warning, I fell asleep going 55 mph on the freeway. Suddenly, I awoke to a blaring horn. I’d drifted to the right and was about to sideswipe a Corvette. I swerved to the left, scared stiff at what had just happened. I realized I was no longer in control of myself. Fatigue had taken over. I could fall asleep again at any moment, and I was only minutes away from my unit. I was lucky! I made it back all right and shaved and dressed for formation. My E-6 took one look at me and ordered me to bed. He later told me I could have been brought up on charges for being unfit for duty. I realized later that he cared enough to stop me from doing something stupid like this again. (Yes, NCOs, you CAN make a difference in your Airmen’s off-duty safety.) I was lucky three times on that trip, which was more luck than I deserved. I let being young and “bulletproof” almost make me dead.

Some hard-learned tips to get you through the long haul:

- Get 7 to 8 hours of sleep before you leave. Long-distance driving is hard work. Also, don’t begin your trip late in the day.
- Plan to drive with a friend. A passenger can help you

with the driving, and conversation can increase alertness.

- Avoid long drives at night. The glare of lights, both from your dash and outside your vehicle, increases the danger of highway hypnosis.
- Don’t use cruise control. Keep your body involved with driving.
- Stop for a rest break every 100 miles or 2 hours. Get out and walk around, or even jog or do some calisthenics. Exercise fights fatigue.
- Avoid alcohol and over-the-counter or prescribed medications that cause drowsiness.
- Caffeine can provide short-term alertness, but be aware it takes about a half hour for caffeine to take effect.

If you can’t stay awake, stop and get some sleep. Find a safe, guarded rest area, truck stop, or service station. Even a short nap, 15 to 45 minutes, can help energize you enough to get to a hotel or motel. ▶

**Editor’s Note:** *The author describes how suddenly sleep can overcome the most vigilant driver. While caffeine and other stimulants are effective up to a point, eventually the sleep debt must be paid. Drivers must ensure they plan for and satisfy the body’s requirement for sleep. Sleep is a creditor that will not be put off indefinitely. Story courtesy of COUNTERMEASURES MAGAZINE.*