

## Motor Vehicle Safety for the Fall and Winter Months

**By Julia Brenner**

On Labor Day weekend, the Air Force concluded its Critical Days of Summer (CDS) safety campaign that encouraged airmen to take care of each other and themselves by rejecting reckless behavior and engaging in risk management. However, alarming Air Force statistics show that motor vehicle accidents remain high. With winter on the horizon, awareness and prevention remain invaluable.

According to the Air Force, 16 airmen fatalities occurred during the 2011 CDS campaign. Seven fatalities involved airmen on motorcycles, while six other deaths involved four-wheeled private motor vehicles. So far in the fiscal 2011, the Air Force has lost 43 airmen in off-duty mishaps, including 29 in motor vehicle accidents. Additionally, 86 percent of all motor vehicle fatalities involved some kind of reckless behavior.

"A high percentage of the summer fatalities were airmen on motorcycles and in automobiles," says Lt. Col. Russell Parker, 446th Airlift Wing flight safety officer. "This shows that traffic safety should be a concern going into the fall months."

Parker says that the motorcycle deaths have been due to excessive speed, loss of control, carelessness and motorcycles with power exceeding the riders' capabilities. "They bite off more than they can chew by buying a bigger and faster bike," he says. "The average rider only needs a 500cc bike. They have enough power to maneuver and maintain speed on the highway and be able to pass slower vehicles if need be, and they also provide a good solid ride. Anyone who rides a 1,500 to 1,800cc bike should have an experienced rider course under their belt."

In addition to motorcycle accidents, automobile accidents also cause airmen injuries and fatalities. Head-on collisions and loss of control are the leading causes followed by fatigue, which Parker believes is as bad as driving under the influence.

"A lot of people go on leave during the summer and take long trips," he says. "They drive longer than they should and during the late-night hours because they don't want to burn most of their leave on the road. They drive faster and with less rest periods than they should. At night a lot of wild animals cross the road. Add that to fatigue and it can be fatal due to delayed reaction time." Parker adds that when taking long trips it is vital to get plenty of rest before the trip and to take driving breaks. If driving with another person, take turns behind the wheel and *always* obey traffic laws.

The unforeseen road and weather conditions that fall and winter bring put drivers at an even greater risk for accidents. According to the Department of Transportation, about one quarter of annual vehicle crashes are weather related. Weather-related crashes are defined as those crashes that occur in adverse weather – rain, sleet, snow or fog – or on pavement covered in water, snow or ice. On average, 7,130 people are killed and over 629,000 people are injured in weather-related crashes each year, with the vast majority of these incidents transpiring on wet pavement or during rainfall. Fall's combination of leaves on a wet or oily pavement is extremely dangerous, says Lt. Col. Kevin Welin, 446th AW chief of safety, as are both black ice and fog.

"Fog can reduce visibility to a quarter of a mile or less, creating hazardous driving conditions," says Tech Sgt. David Breeding, 446th AW ground safety assistant. "Drive with low headlights on and slow down. Fog can create an illusion of slow motion when you may actually be speeding." He says that it is crucial to keep as much distance as possible from other vehicles, adding that fog severely reduces reaction time.

Despite being mindful of factors that are beyond a vehicle operator's control, vehicle maintenance and awareness can limit potential mishaps. "Maintain proper tire pressure and tread, checking your brake lights and checking road conditions before you drive. These are some of the most important things you can do to prevent accidents," Breeding says. He also suggests that drivers store the following items in their vehicles:

- Flares or a reflector triangle kit
- Flashlight and extra batteries
- Bottled water
- Non-perishable food such as candy and beef jerky
- First-Aid kit
- Disposable camera
- Tire flat fixer
- Wool blanket or sleeping bag
- Sanitation and hygiene items
- Fire extinguisher
- A knife

If you suspect there might be adverse weather during your travels, check local road conditions and weather advisories before departing. Be as prepared as possible for road conditions and always leave plenty of time to get to your destination. For other helpful resources, visit the American Automobile Association web site at [www.aaa.com](http://www.aaa.com) or the Washington State Department of Transportation web site at [www.wsdot.wa.gov](http://www.wsdot.wa.gov). There are also motorcycle safety courses on Joint Base Lewis McChord available for reservists. For more information, go to <https://apps.imcom.army.mil/airs/>.

*Julia Brenner is a Communications Intern for ASSE and Professional Safety. This May, she graduated from the School of Journalism at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. She has created videos for Marketwatch/Dow Jones and has been published in Editor & Publisher magazine. She is pursuing a career in writing and reporting.*