

WE Awalked Away

By Maj James Chalkley, Langley AFB, Va.

How many times have you noticed the warnings on the visor of most new cars? I never paid much attention to them either, but fortunately at an early age, I learned to always buckle up anytime I was in a vehicle and have instilled this habit into the entire family. Several months ago on a typical Monday evening, my family packed up in our van for

ordinary, my wife was driving so that I could work on a briefing, and we weren't traveling our normal route since we needed to pick up a replacement string for our oldest son's cello.

We had just dropped off our oldest son at his lesson and were on our way to the music shop. We were traveling north in a somewhat congested, small business and residential area.

For some reason, I happened to look up from my laptop. There was a car coming from our left and running the red light. I tried to warn my wife, but it was already too late. The car hit on the driver's side of our van and pushed the rear end of the van around. Everything seemed to be going in slow motion after the initial impact. As we were being turned around, the van be-

While we were going over, I recall hearing two separate and distinct "thuds." This seemed to make sense — one when we hit the side and the other when we landed on the top. We found out later that one "thud" we heard was the back end of the van hitting another car that was traveling south, right where the window rolls down into the door. The other was when the van flipped onto the roof, completely missing the passenger side except for the very top of the doors. When the van finally came to rest, we were upside down and facing east, meaning that we had been turned 270 degrees and flipped over. I still haven't figured out how we ended up the way we did.

After everything came to a halt, I unbuckled and tried to get oriented. It's a strange sensation getting spun around and turned upside down. My immediate concern was to get everyone out of the van because there was a distinct

campus security officers were three cars away and let us know there wasn't any fire. I unbuckled my wife who checked on our 3-year-old who was sitting immediately behind her. He had been asleep and was in shock from the accident. She was able to get him unbuckled. One of the officers, who had partially crawled in through one of the broken windows, helped her. While our toddler son was being tended to, our other son, who was also sitting on the driver's side, unbuckled himself. All of us were able to crawl out of the shattered passenger side middle window.

The injuries we sustained were minor for the most part, mainly sore muscles, and a few scratches from the seat belts and broken glass. The severest injury was to my wife who suffered a concussion and possible spinal compression after the roof was crushed.

The car that hit us, which was driven by an 18-year-old student, struck us square on the center door where our youngest

either of the other vehicles was injured. Everyone's injuries could have been a lot more severe, if not fatal, had we not been wearing our seat belts. I hate to think what would have happened to our youngest had he not been properly restrained in his booster seat with a five-point harness. Talking to the paramedics and the police, they said that there is no way anyone should have walked away from our van, but we did.

Many people think, "It will never happen to me; I'm a good driver." The one thing that everyone must keep in mind is that "there are other drivers." The best way to protect yourself is to make absolutely certain that before any car is put into motion that everyone in that car is buckled properly. Especially for those with young children, make the investment in a good car seat or booster seat and make sure it is installed and used properly. Not only will it potentially save their lives but also save you a lot of grieving



Here are actual photos taken by Maj Chalkley after the accident, seat belts kept his family safe.

the shuttle back and forth between music lessons and orchestra practice. That night, there were two things out of the

Traffic wasn't too bad for that time of day. The traffic lights were turning green well before we reached any intersections.

gan to tip over sideways. All we could do was hang on for the ride and wait for everything to come to a stop.

smell of smoke. We figured out later the smell was from fluids leaking out onto the engine. Fortunately for us, some

son was sitting. The only injury he suffered was a small scrape on his lower jaw from the clasp on his booster seat. No one in

if your worst nightmare should happen. Because we buckled up that night, we are able to say, "...and we walked away." ▶