

# Scooter Scares

By Lt Col David A. Hagginbothom, Langley AFB, Va.

**W**hat could be more relaxing than a scenic drive around a Caribbean island on a rented motor scooter? Then again, what could be scarier than seriously injuring yourself, your wife, and daughters in an accident on a tourist island hundreds of miles from quality health care? Both thoughts crossed my mind during a recent Caribbean cruise vacation.

When we debarked from our cruise ship for a day of fun, we were surrounded by vendors of local wares along with transportation and tour services. Being the savvy travelers we were, we pushed our way through the crowd and sought out the nearest scooter rental operation with shiny new machines parked out front. After the expected ritual of negotiating a price for two, 2-hour rentals, we

block. Instead, I rationalized away my concerns when both bikes started up without hesitation. After all, the scooters did come equipped with several safety enhancing features: mandatory helmets for driver and passenger, rear view mirrors, turn signals, rear brake light, and horn. Although our previous moped experience had been during our honeymoon a mere 16 years ago, my wife and I felt comfortable after reacquainting ourselves with the basic operations, receiving a tourist map, and being reminded to drive on the left side of the road in this former British colony.

After carefully securing helmets on our daughters and ourselves, we navigated to the outskirts of town and got onto a road that wrapped around the perim-

wheel) brake lever. Although my Personal Risk Management (PRM) warning alarm sounded for a second time, I again dismissed my concerns because I never expected or anticipated ever having to rapidly decelerate anyway.

About 45 minutes into our self-guided tour — after several stops for pictures and market bartering — we approached yet another town's traffic circle. Having mentally mastered the clockwise traffic flow from several others before, I approached with confidence and possibly a little more speed. The difference was that the truck in front of me had properly yielded right-of-way to a vehicle in the circle.

Reacting quickly, I attempted to squeeze the left brake lever. Unfortunately, the

waited for our two-wheeled tourist terrors to be driven around from out back.

The two "rode hard" rides that showed up were quite different from the two new ones out front. My (safety) "spider sense" started to tingle as I assessed the personal risks of the situation. We should have insisted on better quality equipment or walked to the next rental shop down the

eter of the island. Now, without much traffic to worry about, I began to examine in better detail all of my scooter's accessory equipment. The first thing I noted was that my speedometer was inoperative — no real worries there since we would be traveling at tourist speeds. Approaching the first stop sign, I was somewhat annoyed to discover that my bike only had half of its left (rear

combination of sunscreen, sweat, and only half a lever caused me to lose my grip and the lever popped out of my hand. With the distance between the truck and us closing rapidly, my right hand reflexively grabbed the right (front wheel) brake lever and began to squeeze. I felt the rear end getting lighter, but could not mentally will my right hand to relax as momentum pro-

pelled us towards the big rear bumper.

I helplessly watched my 50-pound daughter fly, in slow motion, over my right shoulder with the rear end of the scooter following close behind. I finally let go of the handlebars just in time to break my fall and prevent my own face plant on the asphalt. The scooter came to rest on both of our legs. Graciously, neither the engine nor hot exhaust pipe touched any exposed skin. Despite a badly bruised ego, I only had a superficial scrape on my knee. My daughter had a minor cut on the back of her leg, which we washed out with our bottled water. We then fashioned a compress bandage from a spare handkerchief — all those hours of first aid training finally paid off! I apologized profusely, but reality set in when my daughter asked if she could ride back to the ship with my wife and other daughter.

Of course, there simply was no room for her to do that. We assured both girls that we would take extra time and care during our ride back. The traumatic experience was nearly forgotten by the time we reached town. Unfortunately, due to our unfamiliarity with the area and a series of one-way streets, we couldn't seem to get back to the ship from where we were. I turned down a hill onto one street and immediately realized I was going the wrong way on a one-way road! Luckily, there was no oncoming traffic so I performed a quick U-turn, coming precariously close to the curb on the other side of the street. My wife and other daughter quickly recognized my tactical jink and attempted to perform the same 180-degree maneuver.

As I checked six from my "safe" position up the hill, I helplessly watched again as my wife and daughter arced too wide, ran



over the curb, and ricocheted off of an adjacent chain-link fence. My wife escaped with a scraped ankle, and my completely unscathed daughter announced that she was now going to walk the rest of the way. Within minutes we were all back at the drop-off point, "safely" returning the scooters on time.

Back on ship, we washed and sterilized our wounds, then applied ointment and Band-Aids — "semper paratus" as the Boy Scouts say. Yet, no amount of salve could treat my conscience. Under just slightly different circumstances, any one of my family members or myself could have been seriously injured, permanently crippled, or potentially killed. All during an innocent ex-

cursion where the only intentions were to sightsee and have fun! I still thank God for watching over us.

Even the safest vehicle cannot completely protect a driver who is ignorant, arrogant, complacent, or impaired. But when the safety features or equipment on a vehicle are degraded or disabled, the operator is exposing him or herself to significantly great risk of bodily harm. Deliberate PRM is vital because motor vehicle accidents can occur anytime — on duty, off duty, even on vacation far away from work and home. If a situation doesn't look or feel right, go with your initial assessment of the situation. Do not be too quick to dismiss concerns you might have. Always drive smartly and safely — don't take any unnecessary risks.