

The “Risk” of Motorcycling

RISK: THE POSSIBILITY OF SOMETHING BAD HAPPENING

Gregg McLeod

Gregg McLeod is a former Army Commando (Green Beret) who has served all over the world, including Afghanistan. He ended his 15-year career working with United Kingdom Special Forces in London, England before moving to the United States of America in 2018.

Gregg learned to ride at 29, while in the Army and completed several courses and track days. He also completed his advanced car and motorcycle tests before departing the UK. Gregg has ridden all over Europe, the UK and North America and lead groups of riders from 3 to 38 strong.

Gregg's bike collection has included a Triumph Daytona 675, Triumph Sprint ST, Suzuki Bandit 600, and BMW R1200RT. He also spent a lot of time on Harley-Davidsons while touring the USA.



Note: This article has been slightly edited from its original published form and reprinted here with the express permission of the author, Gregg McLeod.

Joining the Army is a high risk career choice yet people do it every year and no-one makes them. Riding a motorcycle is also a high risk pastime yet people ride every day and no-one makes them. So how do we deal with these “risks?”

RISK MANAGEMENT: THE IDENTIFICATION, EVALUATION, AND PRIORITIZATION OF RISKS FOLLOWED BY COORDINATED AND ECONOMICAL APPLICATION OF RESOURCES TO MINIMIZE, MONITOR, AND CONTROL THE PROBABILITY OR IMPACT OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS.

According to Risk Management we have four ways to deal with any risk (UK Gov. Publishing, Aug. 2011):

1. **Tolerate it:** We accept the risk and do nothing about it.
 - a. **Army:** “Just send civilians to war. They don’t need training. They’ll be fine.”
 - b. **Motorcycle:** “Just jump on a sportsbike. You don’t need training. You’ll be fine.”
2. **Terminate it:** We stop any exposure to the hazard completely.
 - a. **Army:** “Let’s not have any army. It’s just too dangerous.”
 - b. **Motorcycle:** “Okay, I will stop riding and sell the bike.”

3. **Transfer it:** We give the risk to someone else.
 - a. **Army:** *“Let’s send the Navy or the Air Force instead. Or better still, let’s send the French.”*
 - b. **Motorcycle:** *“I have insurance but it’s still risky. You ride it for me and I will take the bus.”*

4. **Treat it:** Do everything realistically possible to lower the risk.
 - a. **Army.** *“Wear the right gear. Look after your vehicle and kit. Conduct realistic training. Keep learning.”*
 - b. **Motorcycle:** *“Wear the right gear. Look after your vehicle and kit. Conduct realistic training. Keep learning.”*

Sometimes riders have stopped riding (*Terminate the Risk*) due to losing someone close to them in a crash or being involved in a crash themselves. Others stop because they have children and decide the risk isn’t worth it. Most riders fall into category 4 - *Treat the Risk*. So, what are the options for us as riders to lower the risk?

Me (gear): Look after yourself first and wear the appropriate kit for the conditions. What kit you wear is highly individual and you should conduct a risk assessment every time. If the weather is 40C/104F you may face a risk of dehydration and loss of focus leading to a crash. Keep in mind that even the shortest journey, on the hottest day, has a risk involved and dress appropriately. Remember to always drink water and stay away from alcohol when you’re riding (if you drink and ride then you’re a bit of an idiot).

My machine (bike): Service it regularly and check it before every ride, whatever acronym you use – [T-CLOCS](#) or [POWDERS](#). Look after your machine and it will look after you. Don’t let the rubber wear down, or the brakes fade, or the oil run low. Most modern machines are easily capable of 100+mph and if something goes wrong, it goes badly wrong.

My environment (training): The environment is arguably the thing you have least control over so you must do all you can to control it through training. In the Army, we train every possible situation, for every possible eventuality. Then we train some more and build on the initial training. We train as realistically as possible – real bullets, real mortars, real artillery, jets and helicopters. The more realistic the training, the more you learn. When we get our next deployment, we do it all again. Countries and climates vary. Situations change. Skills fade. Technology advances. We have to keep ahead of it.

It should be the same with motorcycling. The training should be as realistic as possible with cars, junctions, cyclists, pedestrians, traffic lights, road surface, camber changes, blind bends, open bends, leaves, hills, overtakes etc. We ride in busy cities, open-country, mountains, and flowing canyons and we hope our basic training will keep us safe despite each environment being so different. They all demand respect and present their own hazards: to not realise this, or act upon it, is foolish at best, deadly at worst.

Risk is highly subjective. Your high-risk activity may be another person's sleep-aid. An American Department of Defence (DoD) study conducted during the 'War on Terror' found that soldiers returning from Afghanistan and Iraq were 'Risk Blind' and either didn't see the risks or were complacent (DoD News, 2008, Claims Journal, 2013). Their exposure to highly dangerous situations and their survival had given them a false sense of risk.

Motorcycling at its basic function is very individualistic. You don't want to learn anything? Okay. You don't want to wear a helmet (some States, USA)? Okay. You don't want to stick to safe speeds? Okay. But remember, your ignorance or laziness may cause harm to others: crashing into another vehicle and dying impacts more than just you.

Stay safe out there...

References

U.K. Gov. Publishing, Risk Management in DFID, Finance & Performance Dept. Aug. 2011.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/253815/risk-management-guidance.pdf

DoD News. Motorcycle, Vehicle Accidents Dominate Off-Duty Summer Fatalities
American Forces Press Service, WASHINGTON, July 11, 2008
<https://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=50483>

Claims Journal. Motorcycle Crashes Leading Cause of Death Among U.S. Service Members
December 4, 2013. <https://www.claimsjournal.com/news/national/2013/12/04/240881.htm>