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Tragedy On Wheels: Why Returning Vets Are In Frequent Car Crashes

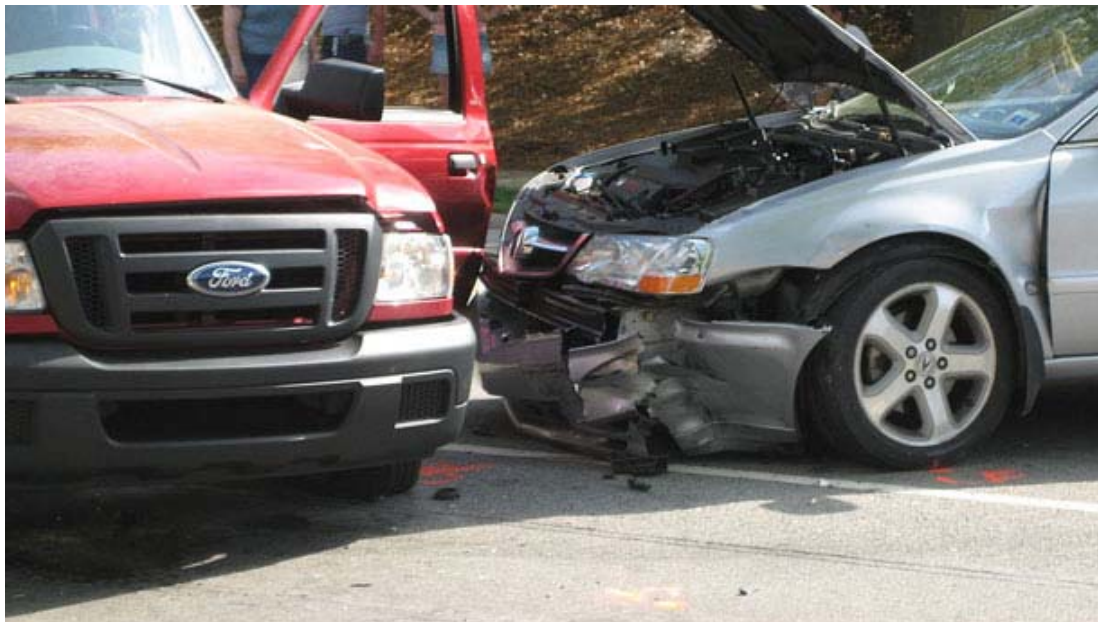
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They're trained to drive aggressively when in Iraq and Afghanistan, but put themselves at risk when they get home

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Traffic accidents are the leading cause of death for military personnel in their first year home from war (triplezero, Flickr).



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Updated on 10/13/2011 to include comments from Stanton's mother, Mary Larkin:

Timothy Stanton was 12 years old when the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks happened. It was then he decided he would join the armed for he was of age.

After serving with the Army Reserve in Iraq as a military policeman, specialist first class, he was rotated home. He was itching to get the start of his leave, hoping this time to go to Afghanistan, according to the [York Dispatch](#), a newspaper near his home.

And although his parents may have feared he'd die in battle, his life instead ended last week while driving down a farm-lined road in According to police, he was [speeding](#) and crossed the center line, striking the driver's side of a [Chevrolet Silverado](#) pickup truck.

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He died later at a local hospital from the injuries sustained in the crash. He was an organ donor, and his organs went to save nine of that day, his family says.

Traffic accidents are the leading cause of death for military personnel in their first year home from the war, according to Karen Cutright, manager for the Veterans Administration who runs clinics for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. More veterans die from car accidents than from any other different kind of tragedy that has gotten more headlines.

Government officials are worried about the number of young veterans getting into fatal car accidents after they return home from the battlefield. The ones dying are young, unmarried males. They tend to come from the infantry ranks, or on gun crews or in seamanship roles.

Stanton's mother, Mary Larkin, told AOL Autos she had no idea her son was at a higher risk for fatal car accidents. Stanton's platoon had been the first responder at the bombing of a children's soccer game in Iraq, and he carried the images of that with him when he got home.

"There should be intensive therapy for our boys when they come home, after living and seeing the horrors that they have," Larkin said.

Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are 75% more likely to die in car accidents than the general population. Historically, veterans have had increased fatalities following Vietnam; vets were twice as likely to die in crashes than non-veterans, and Gulf War veterans had a 30% to 50% greater risk of dying in crashes.

"It troubles me to tell you that once you get them home safely, they are coming home to risk of death and injury on our roadways," said Ronald Medford, deputy director of the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#), in a speech last summer.

Why they are risky drivers

Medford said [NHTSA](#) and the Department of Veterans Affairs were disturbed to discover that a lot of the deaths were due to some risky behavior by the driver – drinking alcohol, not wearing seat belts, or not wearing [motorcycle](#) helmets.

"The bottom line is, these men and women are taught to drive in Iraq and Afghanistan like madmen," said Chuck DeWeese, assistant commissioner of the New York State Governor's Traffic Safety Committee in Albany, N.Y.

While at war, soldiers are trained to look for anything that could be a bomb laying at the side of the road. They could be hidden in animal carcasses or garbage in cars could be filled with bombs ready to blow up a tank.

A 2009 Army study showed that while deployed, 50% of soldiers said they were anxious when other cars approached quickly, 23% had driven through stop signs and 17% were anxious during normal driving.

"When they come back, driving is hard," said DeWeese. "They think they're invincible. They've gone through combat, they think they can live through anything."

Aggressive driving in young soldiers is just one cause of dangerous driving among veterans, Cutright said. Post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury can result in erratic driving, as can medication and self-medicating (using alcohol and illegal drugs) to cope with symptoms. And there is no check to see if the vets are driving their own car when they get back. Their license is, of course, still valid.

Brain injuries go undetected

A Marine captain from Florida says his traumatic brain injury is to blame for a fatal DUI crash he caused in April 2010. Scott Sciple plowed into another car head-on on the wrong way down a Tampa, Fla., highway. The other driver died.

Sciple had earned three Purple Hearts and a Bronze star for heroism for acts in Afghanistan and Iraq. He suffered severe head trauma and nearly died from a fall when he got back to the U.S., he kept driving. He didn't realize many of the mistakes he was making behind the wheel, because he'd often black out.

In a call to his father after the crash, he said he wished he'd died in combat.

"I don't know why I wasn't killed any of the times I was wounded," Sam Sciple quoted his son as saying. "I wish I had been."

Cutright said that when individuals who suffer from traumatic brain injury return home, they may feel as if their driving is normal, but they don't realize that changes have occurred in their brain.

"These changes make it much more difficult to take the information needed to operate a motor vehicle safely," she said.

The Veterans Administration paired up with the Department of Transportation and the Department of Defense to start the Safe Driving Initiative, to increase awareness

crashes among veterans and to encourage them to continue wearing seat belts and to slow down. And they have been using simulators to re-train drivers on ho they return home. The simulators are particularly helpful with brain injury patients, to identify where help is needed.

And the administration is working to make mental health providers more aware of driving issues with veterans.

The Associated Press contributed to this report

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