

Simulator provides sobering lesson on drunken driving

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Navy aims to fight drunken driving

BRIAN CLARK | HAMPTONROADS.TV

By [Matthew Jones](#), The Virginian-Pilot, February 15, 2008

VIRGINIA BEACH

The sailor gripped the wheel, staring at the road ahead. His speed slowed as he weaved from lane to lane, overcorrecting for a disobedient steering wheel.

A car sat stopped at the intersection ahead. He approached and eased down on the brake. Nothing. He pressed harder, but it was too little too late. He rear-ended the car at about 30 mph.

Fortunately, his vehicle was just a simulator, programmed to show him the dangers of drunken driving.



Airman Latoya Tolar tries to keep her car on the road during her spin on a drunken driving simulator. (Vicki Cronis-Nohe | The Virginian-Pilot)

The only actual pain he felt was the razzing from his fellow sailors, who took their turns stopping at green lights, heading the wrong way down one-way streets, wandering into yards and onto sidewalks, and T-boning other cars. The simulator is making its way around local Navy installations as part of the national Save A Life Tour. It is accompanied by gruesome videos illustrating the consequences of drunken driving.

So far, the tour has visited Norfolk Naval Station, the amphibious assault ship Kearsarge and Norfolk Naval Shipyard. It will continue to Little Creek Naval Amphibious Base and the Enterprise.

The simulator puts its subjects in the driver's seat, complete with pedals, a steering wheel, gearshift, speedometer and turn signals. Three large computer screens display the road ahead.

The drivers start sober. The farther they go, the "drunker" they get. If they last long enough, they end up with a blood alcohol content of 0.34, over four times the legal limit.

As the drunkenness sets in, the machine adjusts the car's steering, acceleration and braking to mimic the slowed reaction time that alcohol causes, said Brian Beldyga, the tour's senior manager.

He stood nearby during the simulations, serving as combination coach, backseat driver, confidant and scolder.

"What the heck was that?" he asked one sailor who took a wide turn and stopped for no reason in an intersection. Another slammed on the brakes in the middle of the street when she saw headlights approaching from her right. "Paranoia's a killer," Beldyga said. "Good thing drunk drivers are paranoid. I'm being facetious."

He gave the driver two bits of advice: "Go back to driver's ed. Don't ever drink and drive."

The goal is to puncture their youthful confidence, Beldyga said, and persuade these sailors to think, "Not tonight. It's not worth it."



The best way to do this is to hit their brains with problems they can't handle even when sober, hence the simulator.

How effective a deterrent it is remains to be seen.

Drunken driving fatalities involving sailors are declining, according to the Naval Safety Center. Between fiscal years 2003 and 2007, deaths dropped from 25 to 14 annually. They represent about 31 percent of all motor vehicle deaths involving sailors.

Seaman John Maxwell spent his time in the simulator oversteering and driving far below the speed limit just to keep the car between the lines.

As the father of two young children, the aviation structural mechanic said he wished the program was more widespread.

Seaman Tedrick Rogers, an aviation machinist's mate, also crept down the road, yet still ended up missing signs, running lights and driving all over the grass.

"It opens your eyes to the reality," he said afterward.

As for whether it would make him think twice before drinking and driving, that was already a nonissue.

"I've lost a friend to that," Rogers said.