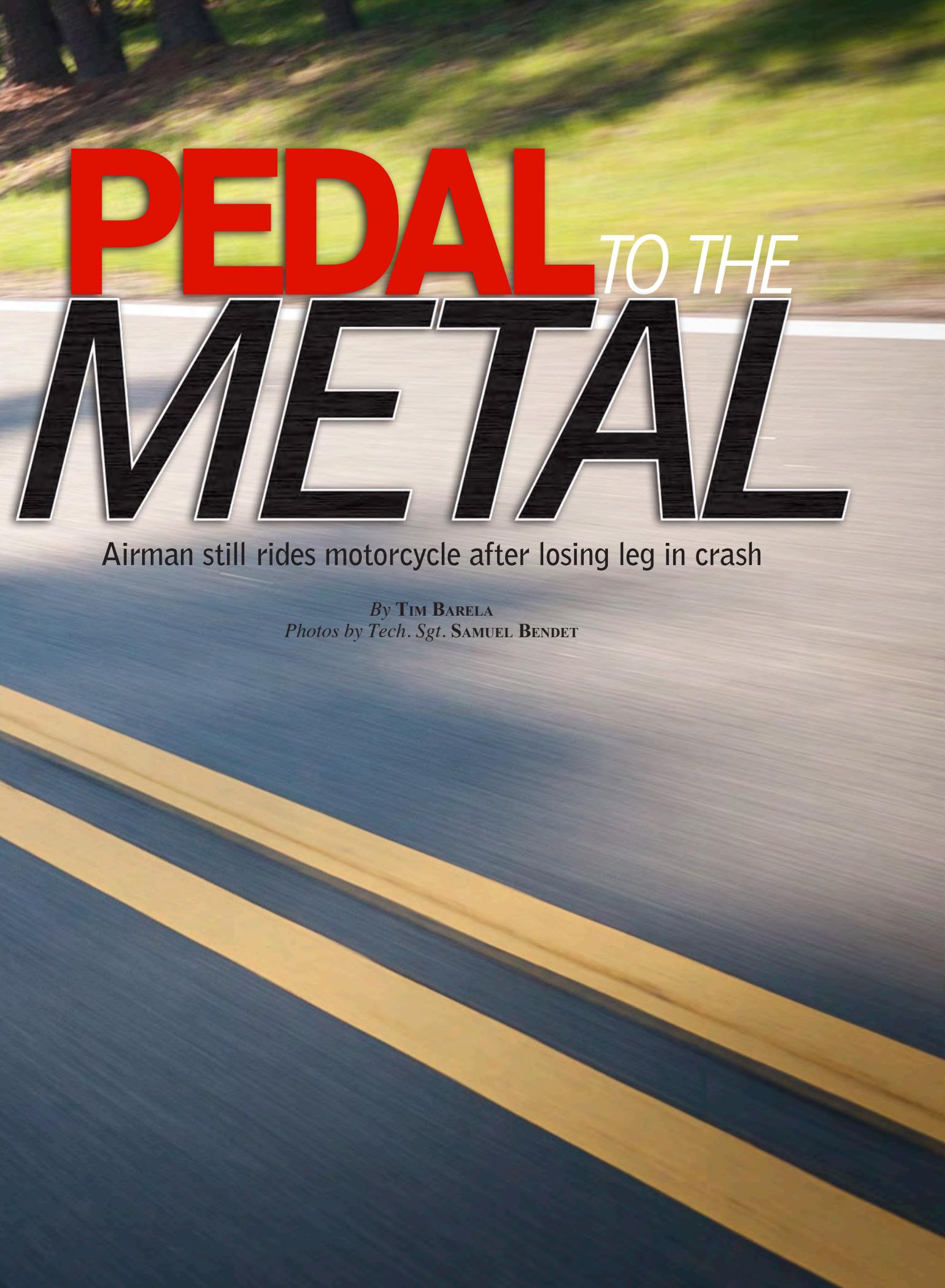




Cruising down the highway,
Staff Sgt. Kevin Barton rides his 2006
Buell Firebolt XB 12R on the rural
roads of Jessup, Ga., using a
prosthesis on his left leg.



PEDAL TO THE **METAL**

Airman still rides motorcycle after losing leg in crash

By **TIM BARELA**
Photos by Tech. Sgt. **SAMUEL BENDET**

Lying there in the road with the cold bite of winter making him shiver, Staff Sgt. Kevin Barton couldn't understand why this lady didn't want him to get up. He knew he'd been in an accident, but he wanted to stand and do a quick inventory of his "baby" ... a custom 2004 Harley-Davidson Sportster 1200.

But the stranger kept insisting he stay lying down. Confused, the 20-year-old Airman obeyed — not from the lady's persistence but more because he started feeling an intense pain in his left leg. What was happening? His leg felt like it was on fire. And as more people arrived and started working on him, it felt as though someone had put his leg in a vice and kept twisting it, while at the same time beating it with a sledgehammer.

Suddenly, Barton felt tired and all he wanted to do was go to sleep. But this lady ... she wouldn't quit talking to him. "What's your mother's name? Where does she live? Tell me about her?" ... Why wouldn't she shut up? He just wanted her to go away so he could sleep ... and make the pain disappear.

While making a left-hand turn, an inattentive driver smashed her Lincoln Continental Town Car into Barton and his Harley Nov. 2, 2007, in Jessup, Ga. A Georgia Air National Guardsman, Barton had been on his way to work at about 7:30 in the morning and was traveling 40 mph through an intersection when the luxury vehicle struck him. The impact tossed his 5-foot-7 frame in the air like a ragdoll, and he landed about 80 feet from the collision ... flying part of the way and bouncing and skidding the rest.

What he didn't know at the time was that he was also 80 feet from his left leg.

"As soon as the car hit me, it severed my leg below the knee and exploded 6 inches of femur out of my thigh," Barton said. "As I lay there on the ground, I had no idea my leg was missing because I could still feel it."

And what he felt was an agonizing pain from his upper thigh to his toes.

An emergency helicopter arrived, and sometime during the flight he lost consciousness. The pain finally stopped. But as he later found out, so did his heart and breathing.

"Basically, I died on the helicopter, and the emergency medical folks had to bring me back during the flight," he said. "I had lost a lot of blood, so it was a miracle that I survived."

Barton didn't find out he'd lost his leg until he woke up in the hospital in Savannah, Ga., five days later.

"My mom and dad were there, and I just remember thinking, 'This sucks,'" he said.

At the time of the accident, Barton was a tactical air combat party member getting ready to deploy to Afghanistan. TACPs are the Airmen on the ground who "hang out" with combat Army patrols to call in airstrikes against enemy targets. It's a tough, dangerous, physically demanding job that Barton loved. But it's a job he'd never get to do again ... not after his injury.

For a while, the Airman worried about all he might not be able to do. He was an outdoorsman who loved fishing, hunting, camping, running and backpacking. He also played a variety of sports to include volleyball, softball, bowling and soccer. He was nowhere near ready to give those things up.

But before he could even consider going back to those types of activities, he had to get out of the hospital.

"You have to come to accept that, hey, you've lost a leg, and you have to move on with your life," he said. "You can't sit there and drown in it for the rest of your life or you're not going to get anywhere; it's going to be a miserable life. So you need to lean on God and family. The only way you can make it is to wake up every morning and find a reason to smile."

Easier said than done at times.

He spent a month in the hospital and had only one surgery that left him with his leg amputated at the middle of his knee. But over the next two years, infections and poor bone health at the injury site led to nearly a dozen more surgeries. And it seemed with each operation, his leg got shorter and shorter.

"I had my last surgery in May 2009, and it left me with only about 4 inches of my leg bone," said Barton, who is now 24.

He said he was "bummed" when he got that news, because the longer the leg is, the easier it is to use a prosthetic. It stirred the emotions of going through the original amputation all over again. Another big blow was learning he could no longer be a TACP.

But the Airman proved to be resilient.

During his recovery, he ran into a girl he knew from high school. They began dating, fell head over heels in love and married a year later (Feb. 13, 2010).

"Meagan has been a big source of my strength," Barton said. "She's a beautiful person."

Then this past November, he cross-trained into cyber transport after completing six months of training at Keesler Air Force Base, Miss. He is now assigned to the 165th Savannah Combat Readiness Training Center and works at the Townsend Bombing Range in Townsend, Ga.

"Kevin doesn't go for being homebound," his new bride said. "He has to be out and about. After his last surgery, he recovered very fast. I like to think I served as a little bit of therapy for him ... another reason to get up and moving."

As a matter of fact, Barton has been so determined, he's hardly slowed down at all.

"I'm not going to try to say I'm the same as I was before, but I am able to do most of the same activities ... just not in the same way," said Barton, who claims he still sometimes feels phantom pain where his left leg used to be that he describes as cramping in his calf or toes.

Regardless, he's done everything from hiking to volleyball.

"As I lay there on the ground, I had no idea my leg was missing because I could still feel it."



Barton needed more than a leg to stand on to get through grueling rehab; he needed a strong support system, which he got in the form of family members like his mom, Wanda (left) and wife, Meagan.



“You have to keep a sense of humor,” says Barton as he rotates his prosthetic leg 180 degrees to use as an armrest.

Perhaps surprisingly, another activity he has returned to is riding motorcycles.

“I just love to ride,” said Barton, who now straddles a 2006 Buell Firebolt XB 12R. “It’s fun. It’s exciting. It’s fast. It’s only me, the road and the wind.”

Well, that’s not entirely accurate. There are those *other* drivers who share the road.

“Yes, you do have to worry about the other guy,” Barton said. “I wore bright neon orange and had my lights on, but the person who hit me still didn’t see me.”

So what advice does he give to other motorcyclists to survive the road?

“Don’t ride,” he said with a chuckle.

Then he added, “First, wear your protective equipment. I probably wouldn’t have survived at all if I hadn’t been wear-

ing my helmet and other protective gear. And secondly, watch out for the other guy. There are so many other drivers on the roads nowadays, and they all seem to be distracted with texting or talking on the phone, eating, reading or putting makeup on. They are in their own little world. But you just have to be extra careful, and you should be OK.”

Just don’t try to convince his mother of that.

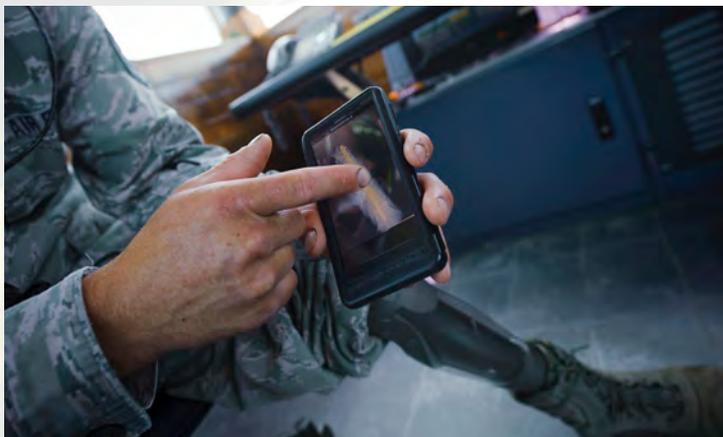
“I don’t like that he still rides,” said Wanda Barton, who claimed her son looked as if he’d been bombed in a warzone after the crash. “There simply is not enough protection on a motorcycle, and people don’t look out for you. It’s amazing what kind of damage a vehicle can inflict.”

Kevin doesn’t want to worry his mom, but the lure of the mechanical “horse” is too much for him.

He added, “I don’t see myself quitting anytime soon.”✈

HOW TO AVOID HITTING A **MOTORCYCLIST**

“There simply is not enough protection on a motorcycle, and people don’t look out for you. It’s amazing what kind of damage a vehicle can inflict.”



On screen, Barton shares some photos from one of nearly a dozen surgeries performed on his leg. He points out how the rods and screws were beginning to puncture his skin.



Working the tower at Townsend Bombing Range, Ga., Barton had to cross-train from tactical air control party to cyber transporter after the motorcycle mishap severed his leg.

1 Be alert for them. Motorcycles aren’t as easy to see as bigger vehicles so you have to keep an eye out for them. Plus, for many, they are seasonal vehicles, so they appear in larger numbers during warmer weather. You need to be aware of this fact and remain even more diligent as the weather warms. People don’t see motorcycles near as much during the winter months, so when they suddenly appear in droves again, many drivers aren’t as attuned to them. So watch and listen for them ... and use your side mirrors.

2 Always use your turn signals. This gives the cyclist and other drivers time to react to your intentions.

3 Avoid distractions while driving. Don’t text or talk on your cell phone. Don’t fiddle with your global positioning system or radio. And certainly don’t apply your makeup while driving. Anything that takes your eyes off the road even for an instant is like playing a dangerous game of Russian roulette.

4 Never tailgate a motorcycle. A fender bender with another four-wheeled vehicle might do little more than scratch or dent a bumper. But the same small contact with a motorcycle could be deadly. So give yourself plenty of stopping distance.

5 Be careful coming out of intersections or crossroads. Look left; then look right. Don’t get into too much of a hurry. An error in judgment here can be a life and death decision.

— Air Education and Training
Command Ground Safety Division