

## The Saddletramps' fatal crash reconstructed

Interviews with survivors, witnesses and others tell the story behind the crash that killed four people and hurt five others

BY STEVE SCHMIDT

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Zippering down a desert highway on his black Harley, his motorcycle buddies at his back, John Lombardo suddenly heard a crash of metal on metal. Chunks of handlebar and engine shot into the air, and something punched a hole in his shin.

Even as he sped ahead, the mayhem behind him, he briefly closed his eyes.

It seemed like the only thing to do. The crash was so explosive that he didn't think he would survive.

Less than a week after that multivehicle accident in Imperial County, the 55-year-old Lakeside man is using a cane while his leg heals. He's among the fortunate.

Four people with ties to the Saddletramps motorcycle club in Lakeside died in the tragedy Saturday on state Route 98, along with a woman from Mexicali, Mexico. Five others were seriously injured; they remained hospitalized Thursday at UCSD Medical Center in Hillcrest.

Two memorial services are planned for this weekend, and several fundraising events are in the works to help the affected families.

Interviews with survivors, witnesses and others tell the story of a day that started out so well for so many people, only to end on a flat, straight, two-lane road near the U.S.-Mexico border.

A Mexicali couple headed west that morning. They were planning a weekend getaway in San Diego.



Saddletramps Motorcycle Club, undated image. Image from their website we have been given permission to use it.



A band of experienced motorcyclists — workaday folk with families and businesses — bore east. These Saddletramps were celebrating their 10th anniversary.

Now they're a badly shaken brotherhood. "I'm having a hard time with this," Lombardo said. "At night, it's worse."

Moments after the accident, Lombardo found himself down the road from the crash. He was in no condition to help his friends, not with his injured leg. So he stayed put.

In a way, he thought, it was better not to see his buddies that way, not with all the blood and severed limbs. Better to remember them as they once were.

### Bikers' destination: Yuma

At 9 a.m. that Saturday, a row of shiny Harleys had lined up on the gravel outside Carl Smith's house in Alpine. Smith, 52, is president of the Saddletramps.

They had helmets, saddlebags and a plan: They would spend several hours threading through the eastern backcountry, avoiding the freeway as much as possible, and wind up at a casino near Yuma for the night.

There was Smith. His club nickname is "Coyote."

There was George "Bill" Miller, 57, of Ramona, who ran a business called A-Built Aluminum Gutters. The others called him "Bigfoot" because he was stocky.

There was Tonya Trayer 37, and her husband, Wilson, 39. The Lakeside couple raised chickens, rabbits and other animals and were active with the 4-H. They had been married for 14 years and raised three children — Amanda, 21, Sierra, 15, and Wilson, 13.

There were the Heaths, Amy and Lance of Alpine. They just celebrated their 15th wedding anniversary and had two boys, 13-year-old Garrett and 14-year-old Wyatt. Amy, 36, was a hairdresser. Lance, 43, worked for a demolitions company. His nickname was "Demo."

About 9:30 a.m., the Heaths and the rest of the group headed out — 21 people on a dozen motorcycles, with Smith leading the pack.

### Tribute to a fallen friend

That same morning, Carlos Ramirez Bobadilla, 36, and his

Amy and Lance Heath, shown in a photo provided by their family, were killed while riding their motorcycle Saturday near Ocotillo in Imperial County. They had recently celebrated their 15th anniversary.



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Five people were killed and five others were seriously injured in a collision involving two cars and several motorcycles Saturday near Ocotillo. The driver accused of causing the crash left the scene.

### Those who died

Anna Corral Gonzalez, 31, Mexicali, Mexico. An attorney for the state of Baja California.

Amy Heath, 36, Alpine. A hairdresser and mother of two boys.

Lance Heath, 43, Alpine. A father and married to Amy. Worked for a demolitions company.

George "Bill" Miller, 57, Ramona. Ran an aluminum gutter business.

Tonya Trayer, 37, Lakeside. Helped raise three children, active with the 4-H.

### Weekend memorials

girlfriend, Anna Corral Gonzalez, 31, left their Mexicali home for a weekend along the San Diego coast.

Both worked for the state of Baja California — Gonzalez as an attorney, Ramirez as a computer systems expert.

The Saddletramps headed east and stopped in Dehesa, along a patch of road where a club member died a few years ago. He was riding alone when the accident happened.

The bikers waved in tribute, revved their engines and moved on, weaving through the mountains and passing through civic specks such as Pine Valley and Guatay. They got on Interstate 8 for a short stretch before turning southeast near Ocotillo to get on state Route 98.

They rode in a staggered formation, the front wheel of each long bike near the side of the bike in front.

It was a sunny 74 degrees and nearing 1 p.m. Their speedometers read about 65 mph. At that rate, they would be pulling up to the casino in an hour.

Then, whoosh.

### The collision

A gold Honda Civic going in the same direction roared up from behind and slipped into the oncoming lane to pass the motorcycles.

It looked like a man behind the wheel. The driver, who wore a baseball cap, appeared to be alone.

Crazy fool, some of the bikers thought. What's he doing trying to pass a pack of Harleys that stretched several car lengths?

The Civic kept barreling east in the oncoming lane — even as an oncoming white Dodge Avenger headed west in the same lane.

Ramirez was steering the Avenger. Gonzalez sat next to him, cradling a Chihuahua puppy in her lap.

The Civic appeared to pick up speed, forcing Ramirez to swerve onto the westbound shoulder. He tried to gain control of his fast-moving vehicle, but as he fought to straighten it out, it shot into the eastbound lane, through the middle of the motorcycle pack.

The first instinct for Smith, the club president, was to chase down the Civic. He saw its brake lights blink, and then it sped on.

Then his ears rang with the sound of metal on metal.

Memorial service for Lance and Amy Heath: 4 p.m. Saturday, El Cajon Mortuary, 684 S. Mollison, El Cajon. A reception will follow at Kateri Tekakwitha Hall, 1054 Barona Road, Lakeside.

Memorial for Tonya Trayer: 2 p.m. Sunday, the Renegade bar, 14335 Olde Highway 80, El Cajon. Preceded by a motorcycle procession set to start at noon at El Cajon Harley-Davidson, 621 El Cajon Blvd.

### Charity events

Saturday: Blood drive in the name of the injured survivors, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., San Diego Harley-Davidson, 5600 Kearny Mesa Road.

Nov. 28: Pat & Oscar's in Parkway Plaza, El Cajon, 2 to 9 p.m. Twenty percent of sales will be donated to a Heath family trust.

Dec. 4: Cut-a-thon at Studio B salon, 1347 Tavern Road, Alpine.

To help out: People wishing to donate to the Saddletramps can send contributions in care of the Smiths, 16204 Alpine Blvd., Alpine, CA 91901.

He looked in his right rearview mirror. He saw a motorcycle 20 feet in the air. It was on fire.

### A chaotic scene

The other bikers scrambled in the chaos. Tom "Short Cut" Knight, near the rear of the pack, struggled to steer through a 100-foot-wide spread of oil, blood, molten metal and bodies.

The Avenger came to a halt near the middle of the highway.

Smith got off his bike and rushed to check several bodies for a pulse. George "Bill" Miller: nothing. Amy Heath: nothing. Lance Heath: nothing.

Tonya Trayer seemed to be breathing, so Smith tried cardiopulmonary resuscitation. She faded away.

It took several hours for the California Highway Patrol, paramedics, Life Flight crews and others to work through the wreckage. The most seriously injured victims ended up at UCSD Medical Center.

Ramirez and motorcyclist Kelly Halley, 42, of Santee were listed in good condition Thursday. Saddletramps member William Barnes, 57, of San Diego was in serious condition, while his wife, Melanie Barnes, 46, was listed as fair.

Wilson Trayer's family has asked that his condition not be released, but a relative said Thursday that Trayer could be in a wheelchair for as long as a year.

The driver of the gold Honda Civic remains at large.

### A surprise survivor

When Gonzalez's body was pulled from the Avenger, hours after the crash, paramedics found the Chihuahua nestled in the dead woman's arms.

The female puppy was alive. It hadn't made a single sound while buried in the wreckage. No one had known it was there.

The dog was passed around the crash scene. One woman clung to the creature, finding comfort in its softness and fragility.

Then it was taken to an animal shelter, and Gonzalez's family picked it up this week.

*steve.schmidt@uniontrib.com (619) 293-1380 Twitter @SteveSchmidt1*

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