

Autopilot?

By Reg P. Wydeven
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My great-uncle Clarence used to tell awesome stories. Some of his favorites were from his days teaching driver's education. One of his students asked if she could put on the cruise control. When he said yes, she reclined the seat, put her hands behind her head, and enjoyed the ride. Thankfully he grabbed the wheel and explained to her the difference between cruise control and autopilot.

Fast forward 50 years, and we now have cars that actually drive themselves. But just like Uncle Clarence's student, we still can't fall asleep at the wheel.

Several car manufacturers now offer self-driving vehicles, including Cadillac, Volvo, Tesla, Audi, Mercedes, Infiniti and Nissan. Using cameras and radar technology, the cars' adaptive cruise control, lane keep assist, and automatic emergency braking allow the vehicles to stay in their lane and a safe distance from other automobiles.

While the cars can steer themselves, the manufacturers are quick to warn drivers that they still need to pay attention and keep their hands on the wheel at all times. Tesla's owner's manual reads, "Autosteer is not designed to, and will not, steer Model S around objects partially or completely in the driving lane."

Not everyone, however, reads the manual. According to the California DMV, there have been 56 autonomous vehicle accident reports in the Golden State alone. One such incident involved a Tesla Model S that smashed into a firetruck in Culver City. The \$70,000 car crumpled, but thankfully no one was injured. After the driver explained that the car was "on autopilot," the National Transportation Safety Board is now considering investigating the crash.

Another Tesla Model S was involved in an incident on San Francisco's Bay Bridge. Police found the driver passed out behind the wheel with a blood alcohol content at twice the legal limit. He told the California Highway Patrol officers not to worry, however, because the car was "on autopilot." Making Ponch and John proud, the CHiPs arrested the driver and charged him with driving under the influence.

Tesla responded by saying they adequately warn drivers that they need to stay engaged, and if they don't, they've installed safety measures. The drunk driver was found by officers thanks to one such failsafe. If the Model S detects the driver's hands aren't on the steering wheel, it will beep. If that doesn't get the driver's attention, the car will put on its hazard lights and slow to a stop. Most self-driving cars have a similar feature.

The technology is so good, though, it lulls drivers into a false sense of security. The vehicle can travel uneventfully for miles on a highway, making its driver think everything is under control. If a deer or cardboard box is in the lane, however, this can spell doom for the inattentive driver.

And where there are crashes, there are lawsuits. One such suit was filed in U.S. District Court in San Francisco against General Motors. It was filed by Oscar Willhelm Nilsson, a motorcyclist who was injured by a Chevrolet Cruise AV. The Chevy swerved into his lane and injured him, causing him to be unable to work. The SFPD's accident report indicates that Nilsson caused the accident by trying to pass a vehicle before it was safe, so we'll have to see what the court decides.

Some of these incidents get me scared. So then I think about Uncle Clarence's other favorite driver's ed story about the woman who was so chesty she beeped the horn every time she shifted gears.

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