Commandant's NOTE

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Safety During Field Training

As infantrymen and as leaders, we need to make safety part of everything we do, and this is never more important than during field training exercises (FTXs). The potential for death or injury to soldiers and for the loss of equipment is at its greatest when we deploy to the field, and I want to highlight a few of the reasons why our soldiers continue to be injured and tell you how we can prevent this.

The Infantry Safety Manager at the Army Safety Center, Fort Rucker, Alabama, has reviewed accidents that have occurred on recent FTXs, and his findings highlight the necessity for integrating safety into all of our training.

There is a pervasive misconception that the enforcement of safety procedures tends to reduce realism in our training. The issue is not safety versus realism, however; it is simply the enforcement of proper training standards. The accident study has revealed that most accidents during FTXs occur because soldiers do not perform to standards, and that leaders do not enforce the standards.

In one case, for example, a five-ton truck with fuel pods and trailer overturned. The driver was killed, the vehicle was destroyed, and 1,100 gallons of fuel were lost. The facts of the case were that the driver was inexperienced, he was operating alone, and he was fatigued—a combination of conditions his leaders should never have allowed to exist. In a combat situation, such a loss of manpower, equipment, and fuel could mean the difference between victory and defeat.

Another soldier was seriously injured when the overhead cover on his fighting position caved in. The soldier had placed plywood over the position and had covered it with sandbags and dirt without reinforcing it from underneath. The soldier knew the correct way to construct overhead cover, but he chose to take a shortcut. By failing to supervise the task and enforce the standard, his leaders had allowed him to do it. As a result, the soldier had to be evacuated; the unit lost both a man and a fighting position that were important to the defense. Certainly the same incident could occur in combat, with much more serious consequences.

Some might argue that in combat this soldier would have had the incentive to build the position right. In the heat of battle, however, a soldier will instinctively do what we have trained him to do. If a soldier does not do things right in training, chances are he won't do them right in combat. The difference is that in combat shoddy performance will endanger him and other soldiers as well.

The top five areas of safety concern today involve soldiers who are driving, parachuting, climbing on vehicles, working around hatches and winches, and walking or running.

Driving. Half of all FTX accidents have involved drivers of vehicles, and many of them occurred because a driver was new to the Army or to the unit and was not familiar with its equipment. In several incidents, soldiers had been told to drive vehicles they had never operated before.

Commanders must make sure that drivers operate only the equipment for which they are qualified and licensed. The best starting point must be a solid unit driver training program that includes operator maintenance, driver proficiency, and knowledge of the particular situation. Sustainment training is essential, and we must make sure that we validate our soldiers' driving skills regularly.

Parachuting. The major contributors to parachuting injuries have been improper parachute landing falls (PLFs) and misrouted static lines. Although the proper execution of both tasks is clearly an individual responsibility, this does not absolve leaders of all responsibility. Jump proficiency is a training issue—commanders are responsible for training programs, and leaders are respon-

sible for training.

The problem with PLFs has been a failure to perform to standard, most often a failure to keep feet and knees together. Static line misrouting has resulted from a combination of failures. When performing the one-minute equipment check before jumping, for example, a jumper must pay special attention to the static line of the jumper in front of him. This may require additional training that better defines the jumpmaster's "check equipment and sound off with equipment check." Good exit and body position are equally important in preventing misrouted static lines.

Climbing on Vehicles. Falls from vehicles have contributed significantly to FTX accidents. Soldiers who jump off vehicles or climb around on them invite injury. Again, this is a leadership problem—soldiers who are routinely allowed to jump off vehicles will tend to do so even when they are wearing 60-pound rucksacks. When soldiers are climbing around on tracked vehicles, they must adhere to the "three points of contact" standard; that is, with both feet and one hand or both hands and one foot secure.

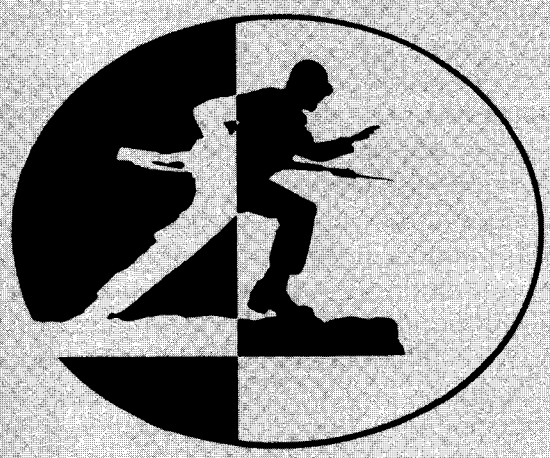
The camouflage nets on vehicles are another problem—25 percent of the falls from vehicles have occurred when soldiers became entangled in the netting or were tripped by it. Leaders need to ensure that nets are properly secured and that soldiers understand the risks they pose.

Working Around Hatches and Winches. Hatch and winch injuries can also be eliminated if certain standards are enforced. As a preventive measure, hatches must be inspected during pre-operational checks, and latches must be checked for serviceability. Under no circumstances should field "overrides" be allowed. One example of this practice is latching back the latch devices on the Bradley fighting vehicle. This seems to be a common practice, and it has caused far too many accidents.

Soldiers must operate winches in a manner that keeps their fingers and hands away from the point where the cables feed in. Most often, accidents have occurred when a soldier's glove caught in a frayed cable and pulled his hand or fingers into the rollers. Too, frayed cables may break under tension, thus creating another serious safety hazard. We must train our soldiers to stand well clear of a cable that is under tension.

Walking or Running. The most common accident to soldiers who are walking or running has been one in which a branch struck a soldier in the face. In many cases, the soldier in front had let go of a branch and allowed it to whip back. This kind of injury can easily be prevented if interval standards are enforced and if soldiers are instructed to be mindful of those behind them and are required to wear eye protection.

I am convinced that FTX accidents can be reduced if leaders emphasize these five areas of concern during pre-exercise safety briefings and conduct follow-up checks in the field. Safety is no accident; it is the enforcing of established standards.

Leaders must watch for unsafe acts and take aggressive action to make on-the-spot corrections. When a leader allows a soldier to deviate from the standards, he establishes a new standard—all too often a lower one. A leader's failure to tell a driver to slow down is the same as telling him it's all right for him to speed.

A host of people are available to help commanders and leaders integrate safety into their training. My principal contacts are the Director of Evaluation and Standards and the Infantry Safety Manager at Fort Benning (telephone AUTOVON 835-5868; commercial 404/545-5868), and the Infantry Safety Manager at Fort Rucker (telephone AUTOVON 558-6595; commercial 205/255-6595). Don't hesitate to call on them for assistance.