



U.S. Army Sgt. Phatsara Chanthaniouon assists Sgt. Kaylee Kham with decontamination procedures during hazardous material operations training at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait, Jan. 31, 2020. Both Soldiers are chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) specialists with the 379th CBRN Company. (U.S. Army photo by Cpl. Joseph Black)

# Safety: A Leadership Imperative

*By Command Sgt. Maj. Richard D. Stidley*

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**I**t is difficult to overestimate the importance of safety in our Army. During our nearly 238 years of existence, preventable losses have taken a heavy toll on both our Soldiers and mission effectiveness. Statistics tell the tale: almost twice as many Soldiers died from accidents and disease as enemy action in every American conflict from the Mexican-American War through World War I. Accidents alone were responsible for one of every five Soldier deaths during World War II and one of every seven in Vietnam. The numbers were especially devastating during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, when 62% of Army

fatalities were attributed to non-hostile causes. Yet, even in the midst of the longest continuous conflict in our nation's history, Army accident rates have fallen to peacetime levels.

The answer as to why, is a complex one. We have learned important lessons from the past, and advances in technology and protective equipment have mitigated the lethality of human error and other accident causes. That is only part of the picture, however. We have gotten better and better as an Army at managing risk, and policies and processes designed to protect Soldiers and maintain combat readiness are more streamlined than ever before. The

greatest credit for our success, though, is due to the most basic elements of Soldiering: leadership and camaraderie. Leaders and Soldiers looking out for and encouraging one another to make smart decisions every day, on and off duty, have had a far greater impact on safety than any policy or piece of equipment possibly could.

As noncommissioned officers (NCO), we are the firewall for Soldier safety. Notice I did not say “first line of defense” or

“vanguard” or any of the fancy terminology that has dominated the safety conversation during the past few years. In my mind, our priority as leaders is to prepare our Soldiers to be their own first line of defense against accidents by making wise risk decisions, whether on a road in Afghanistan or a highway at their home station. Of course, we must lead the accident prevention effort and mentor and guide them as

they find their way to a safety-focused lifestyle, but holding our Soldiers accountable for their own well-being is just as important. Getting there, however, will require us to move past some the common misconceptions about safety and embrace safety as what it really is: a critical combat multiplier in an age of tactical uncertainty.

Many new, ambitious NCOs go into their first leadership assignments with lofty goals in mind. A zero-risk policy should not be one of them. While it might seem counterintuitive, seeking to eradicate all hazards can actually hinder workable safety goals. It is entirely within our power to control and mitigate risk to acceptable levels, and we can do it without constraining Soldiers to the point of ineffectiveness. Planning for and wisely executing the mission is essential to combat readiness; safety will work to your advantage if we let it. Know your Soldiers, their individual and collective strengths and weaknesses, and build a flexible safety program that meets their needs and can be adapted as conditions change.

The line of communication between you and your Soldiers will be critically important, especially regarding safety. They should be invested in their safety program, not simply told what to do from the top down. The most successful safety initiatives are those where Soldiers “buy in” to what their leader is promoting, and asking them to participate in the process is the best place to start. I know that idea might run counter to what many



U.S. Army 1st Sgt. Jose Valesquez with the 91st Brigade Engineer Battalion, 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, checks the undercarriage of one of his company's vehicles during a unit safety day in Boleslawiec, Poland, Nov. 15, 2018. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Ron Lee)

of you have experienced in the Army, but safety demands inclusion. Soldiers are some of the most creative people on the planet, and I am continually surprised at the candid responses I get when talking to them about safety. You will not be any less of a leader or lose authority by asking them how you and the unit can better approach safety issues. It all goes back to letting your Soldiers take ownership of the process, enabling them to think through and solve problems themselves, all skills that will serve them well off duty.

Do not fall into the trap of thinking your Soldiers are “safer” at home station. As forces redeploy from abroad and we transition back to a smaller, peacetime Army, I fear that complacency is going to become a problem for leaders and Soldiers alike. The immediate threat of a tangible human enemy may be gone, but risk is one of the stealthiest and deadliest opponents we face. Even our worst years for accidents during the past decade, plus those of war do not compare to the hun-



U.S. Army Sgt. Leah A. Peck, a jumpmaster assigned to the 54th Brigade Engineer Battalion, 173rd Airborne Brigade, conducts a jumpmaster pre-inspection in preparation for airborne operations at Villafranca Air Base (3rd Wing), Pordenone, Italy, May 21, 2019. (U.S. Army photo by Paolo Bovo)

dreds of Soldiers lost annually during the long peace between Vietnam and Operation Desert Shield. Most of those fatalities were due to private motor vehicle accidents, which remain the number one accidental killer of Soldiers today. It is a tragedy for a Soldier to survive the brutalities of combat only to return home and die in a preventable accident, especially when something as simple as slowing down or wearing a seat belt could have saved him or her. There is no possible way for you to be everywhere at once, and that is why you must inform and empower your Soldiers to make smart safety decisions all the time.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly — be a safety leader, and lead by example. Soldiers are smart and they know when their leaders are just talking, not doing.

responsible mentor. Have fun, but always play it safe.

I commend you all for the hard work and dedication it has taken to reach this point in your careers. You have a challenging, yet immensely rewarding task ahead. For more information on safety and leadership, please visit the U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center website at <https://safety.army.mil>. Also be sure to print a copy of *Army Regulation 385-10, The Army Safety Program* and *Department of the Army Pamphlet 385-10, Army Safety Program* for your desktop reference set.

Keep up the great work, and remember, Army Safe is Army Strong! ■

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For the past several years, more than half of all Soldiers killed on motorcycles have been NCOs. Unfortunately, indiscipline was involved more often than not in those accidents, and it is doubtful these leaders died on their first careless ride. The life we lead has a profound impact on our Soldiers, so we must hold ourselves to the very same standards we expect of them. You have young, impressionable men and women looking up to you now, and it is your duty to be a

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