

Noncommissioned Officers: Key to Protecting the Force

Noncommissioned officers are the key to force protection in both war and peace. NCOs accomplish this by training to and enforcing standards. The "profession of arms" is a risky business and leaders at every level must develop a higher degree of awareness regarding accidents and their impact on the modern battlefield. This begins by knowing what factors generate accidents and how to reduce the possibilities of their occurrence. Risk management is the tool used to accomplish this task. Good leaders know how to lead soldiers and manage risks.

Accident Generators

Last year 90 percent of our ground-related fatalities were in the ranks of private to staff sergeant. That means 205 soldiers died before their time. In every case, it was the first-line supervisor who was closest to these soldiers. That's the main reason I say NCOs are the key to fixing this force protection issue.

Individual soldiers continuing to ignore standards is the greatest generator of human-error accidents and contributed to 48 percent of all accidents. Sergeants, being the first line leaders, can significantly reduce this percentage by training soldiers to standard and enforcing the standard, on and off duty.



BG R. Dennis Kerr, director of the U.S. Army Safety Center, Fort Rucker, Ala.

This responsibility to reduce accidents overlaps the commander's responsibilities in force protection, thus creating a shared responsibility in preventing accidents. If anyone can make the buddy system work 24 hours a day, it's our NCOs. And the buddy system saves lives and equipment and enhances the warfighting capabilities of the unit.

Commanders set the stage for the leadership climate in their units. If done right, all of the officers, NCOs and safety personnel are actively involved. These are the people, influenced by their commander, who can identify the hazards, minimize or eliminate the risks associated with the modern battlefield and conserve combat power for the fight.

Soldiers follow leaders not just because of rank and position but also because of the motivation leaders inspire by the image they create. This image involves three qualities. First, courage, both moral and physical; second, tactical and technical competence; and third, ability to act. Soldiers expect their NCOs to set the climate for performance to standard in individual training as they maneuver through each of the battlefield operating systems. This climate takes some time to develop, but soldiers perceive the true values of their leaders. They also take note of how NCOs handle difficult situations. Do they have the courage to act when soldiers violate known standards? Do they do so consistently?

The NCO must do what is right even if it's not popular, expedient or career enhancing. Sometimes it seems easier to look the other way and pretend a violation didn't occur, especially if the mission was accomplished without incident or if the violator was a senior officer or NCO. There should be one rule for everyone—that's what soldiers expect.

With the NCOs help, we can continue reducing these terrible losses, and the application of risk management will become the standard in eliminating hazards and reducing or controlling the risks we face in our profession.

In 1992, 237 Soldiers Died Before Their Time



At the end of his four-day pass, the soldier was pushed for time to get back to post. As he was speeding down the highway during a sleet storm, he lost control of his car and drove it under a tractor trailer parked on the highway's shoulder. He died instantly.

A soldier decided to sightsee and take pictures of battlefields. He picked up what appeared to be unexploded ordnance. After looking at the explosive, he dropped it; when it hit the ground, it exploded at his feet. He died on the way to the hospital.



Enforce Standards To Save Limbs and Lives

Enforcing standards is training.

Enforcing standards is leadership.

Enforcing standards is safety.

All three work toward a common goal—accomplishing the mission and saving limbs and lives.

The importance of safety practices in the conservation of our most precious resource—soldiers—cannot be over-emphasized, especially when one considers the 270 (Total Army) soldiers' lives lost to accidents in 1992. I'm particularly pleased *The NCO Journal* is devoting an entire issue to Safety and Force Protection.

Historically in wartime, accidents have accounted for the largest number of casualties. For example, in every war except the Korean War, accidents claimed more lives than did enemy action, according to Army Safety Center statistics. In World War II, 56 percent of the casualties were caused by accidents; in Vietnam it was 54 percent. And in Operation Desert Shield/Storm, 75 percent of the casualties were the result of accidents.



SMA Richard A. Kidd

What is even more disturbing is that the peacetime figures are not much better. We must realize that these "figures" are soldiers.

Recently, while at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, I visited with two soldiers who were recovering from accidental injuries. During our chat, one of the soldiers admitted his injuries could have been prevented if he had made the necessary safety checks he'd been taught, while the other said he had not taken the required safety precautions (risk assessment).

These soldiers were fortunate, they lived. Many don't get a second chance.

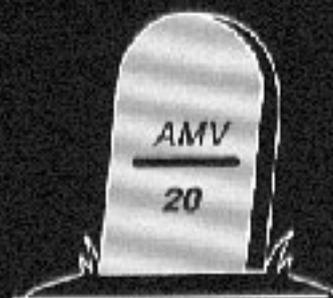
In these times of reduced personnel strengths, it becomes increasingly important for all leaders to make a critical assessment of how we go about our daily activities.

Soldiers in hospitals recovering from injuries have a direct effect on a unit's readiness posture. Our Army is judged by its combat readiness posture and its effectiveness on the battlefield. Key to achieving these two elements is healthy and well-trained soldiers.

We are making progress in integrating "force protection" training initiatives throughout our Noncommissioned Officer Education System. These safety initiatives will help NCOs better manage risks and eliminate potential hazards.

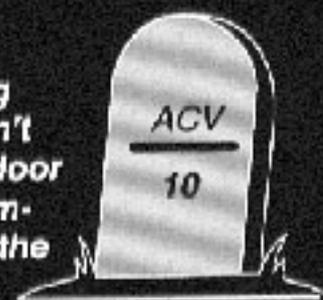
Remember, accidents occur because standards are not enforced. We must do better! *Enforcing standards is training, is leadership and is safety!*

Although we have made some progress in reducing accidents, I encourage all NCOs to heed the advice offered in this issue. The soldier, our "ultimate weapon," is too precious a resource to do otherwise.



A soldier was killed when he fell from the vehicle he was riding and was run over by the same vehicle. The unit was making a night tactical move at about 10 mph when the M548A1 ammunition carrier in which he was riding crossed a ditch. The soldier, who wasn't wearing his safety belt, was jolted out of the vehicle. He was pronounced DOA at the hospital.

During a training exercise, the scout observer in the Bradley cavalry fighting vehicle (CFV) spotted the enemy approaching from the rear. The observer didn't have proper communications equipment and went through the turret access door to inform the driver. However, the gunner was responding to another radio communication and put the turret in motion. The observer's head was crushed by the turret. He died instantly.



A soldier was shot and killed during live-fire training in a tire house. A four-man team was conducting live-fire close-quarters battle training in a poorly maintained facility when their NCO decided to accelerate the training. The soldiers weren't wearing any kind of protective vests. A team member placed a target where it blocked an incoming soldier's view. When he fired, the bullet went through the target and hit the soldier on the opposite wall. He died on the way to the hospital.