

Protecting the Force

"Over the years, you see needless accidents and loss of life in combat and off-duty... Had most actions been thought out a moment longer, especially off-duty, they might not have happened. There's always been something that irked me about that."

By Cindy Ramirez

Protecting the force from deadly accidents requires that Soldiers embark on most every activity as a mission — on and off the battlefield, said Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Eyer of the U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center, Fort Rucker, Ala.

"What I'm trying to infuse, to encourage, Soldiers to do is to continually think through everything as if they were on a mission, taking precautions and considering all risks, instead of thinking of something, doing it on the fly and going at it haphazardly," Eyer said.

Whether it be a helicopter crash, a combat vehicle rollover while on duty or an off-duty crash involving a privately owned vehicle, Eyer said he believes many accidents are preventable.

"Over the years, you see needless accidents and loss of life in combat and off-duty," said Eyer, who joined the U.S. Army in 1984 after having served 12 years in the British Army. "Had most actions been thought out a moment longer, especially off-duty, they might not have happened. There's always been something that irked me about that."

With the mission to serve as the "center of gravity for all loss-related areas," the Readiness/Safety Center is the Army's hub for loss-data collection, analysis and information dissemination to help maintain "combat power" by "preserving human capital," according to the center's Web site.

In short, the center works to keep Soldiers safe, said Eyer, who assumed his responsibilities at the Readiness/Safety Center in October 2009. He explained the duties of the Readiness/Safety Center include creating accident-prevention education and awareness programs, establishing aviation- and ground-safety policies, investigating accidents and accidental fatalities, and advising the Army on how to prevent accidents.

Eyer said while both on- and off-duty accidents are on the decline, the high number of accidents and accidental fatalities on the homefront continues to concern him.



Photo by Cindy Ramirez

Command Sgt. Major Michael Eyer of the U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center, Fort Rucker, Ala., says he's seen countless accidental deaths during his 25 years in the military. Eyer assumed his responsibilities at the Safety Center in October 2009.

According to Safety Center statistics, incidents involving privately owned vehicles account for about 60 percent of accidental fatalities in the Army. However, Eyer said, the risk of accidents increases overall during the summer due to numerous outdoor activities Soldiers engage in, including boating, swimming, hiking or riding all-terrain vehicles or motorcycles. In April, the center launched its 2010 summer safety campaign, "Play it Safe," to remind the Army family that taking basic precautions when embarking on these activities can save lives.

Safety begins with the Soldiers themselves but requires the engagement of noncommissioned officers and families, Eyer said.

"When it comes to safety, making Soldiers understand they're responsible for themselves and their buddies, and ensuring they know that their NCOs are there for them, makes a difference in the choices they make."

Invincible and free

The loss of life during conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan has required Soldiers and the NCO Corps to employ Composite Risk Management more than ever before, and efforts to curb those death statistics are translating into stronger safety policies and procedures, Eyer said.

Composite Risk Management is the Army's decision-making process to identify dangers and mitigate risks associated with hazards that have the potential to injure or kill personnel, damage or destroy equipment, or otherwise impact mission effectiveness.

Risk management has been in place in the Army since FM 100-14, *Risk Management*, was introduced in 1998 as the first doctrinal publication detailing the step-by-step process to preserve resources — manpower and equipment. The manual outlined the framework leaders should use in planning and executing missions — operational, training or garrison. In 2006, Composite Risk Management was updated to encompass all operations and activities on- and off-duty and focused on teaching Soldiers “how” to think, rather than telling them “what” to think.

Under this updated model, Eyer said, it became necessary for leaders to talk with Soldiers about actions, risks and consequences rather than handing them a list of “don'ts.”

“It's really forcing Soldiers to think for themselves, to consider the risk and consequences,” Eyer said. “It became a culture change that we're still adjusting to.”

The same basic safety policies that are often in place on the battlefield during warfare aren't always followed back home during downtime, Eyer said.

“It's getting out of theater and being allowed to be on your own where trouble comes in,” he said. “You're now left alone in making those decisions that, when [you were] on duty, were being made for you in most regards.

“You have very bright, very intelligent young Soldiers who have been challenged by war — who have lived through the frustrations and the friction and the challenges of combat — who are now on their own and are having to make decisions without that guidance. It's a sense of invincibility coupled with a sense of freedom.”

Signaling a cease fire

Risk management should be used at all times, Eyer said.

“Composite Risk Management is presented to them as part of mission training, but no one talks of CRM as an off-duty-type guide to mitigate problems that you encounter off duty,” he said. “[Soldiers] don't often stop to think that the same Composite Risk Management applies to everyday activities.”

One way to reduce the number of accidents and accidental deaths in the Army, Eyer said, is to literally and figuratively signal a cease fire: Stop!

“We've got to develop a culture within our Soldiers that it's not just an option, but a responsibility to speak up and signal [cease fire] when something is wrong; for example, if they're riding in a vehicle that is going too fast,” said Eyer, waving his

arm and hand, palm out, in front of his face. “If you are a Soldier and know something is wrong, don't allow it to continue to happen. Tell someone. Make that signal.”

Engaged leadership

NCOs and senior leaders also have to be ready and willing to signal a cease fire, Eyer said.

“As a leader, you have to create a relationship where, if a Soldier gets into a problem, he will feel comfortable enough to call you before it gets worse. There has to be involvement and trust. It takes engagement to the next level.”

Senior leaders need to provide Soldiers activities that not only help them decompress after deployments, but also fulfill their zeal for adventure, yet in a controlled environment that includes training and safety measures.

“We've got to keep our Soldiers engaged in off-duty activities to keep up morale,” Eyer said. “More importantly, we've got to help them get rid of those frustrations they would typically release during a combat operation or tour, while keeping them ready to go should they be called to serve another tour,” Eyer said.

Family involvement

Finally, Eyer said, families need to be involved in Composite Risk Management, too, to serve as the voice of reason for Soldiers who might otherwise ignore others telling them what they should or shouldn't do.

“It is a powerful side of it, family,” Eyer said.

“We have to understand the power of spouses, of family, and the influences they have over the Soldiers in making them understand the consequences of certain behaviors.”

That's where Family Readiness Groups come in.

Family Readiness Groups are command-sponsored organizations of families, volunteers, Soldiers and civilian employees that provide support to units through a variety of activities.

Having the involvement of FRGs also provides leaders a forum through which they can inform and educate family members about safety.

The Safety Center recently introduced the Family Engagement Kit, a campaign featuring videos, posters, safety tips and other resources and tools aimed at helping family members engage in some of the same risk-management thinking that Soldiers use.

“When we talk safety in the Army, we're not just talking about Soldiers. We're talking about families, civilians,” Eyer said.

The bottom line

Thinking of everyday driving as a mission may not seem like enough to prevent accidents altogether, Eyer reaffirms, but it can make a significant impact.

“If you look at the statistics, you find some of the most basic safety rules were not followed: Seatbelts weren't buckled, speed limits were ignored or there was no advance planning. No one was thinking, ‘Composite Risk Management tells me to buckle up, slow down or plan ahead.’ But if it can't hurt, why not employ it if it can save your life or that of a loved one?” 

To contact Cindy Ramirez, e-mail cindy.ramirez1@us.army.mil

“If you look at the statistics, you find some of the most basic safety rules were not followed.”