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U.S. ARMY COMBAT READINESS CENTER

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Driving toward a safe holiday season

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Like many Americans, Soldiers across the Army will be hitting the road for extended trips to visit family and friends during holiday block leave — and the drive to, from, and in and around their destinations will be the deadliest hazard they face during this otherwise joyous time of year.

Approximately nine to 10 Soldiers die annually in off-duty private motor vehicle mishaps between Thanksgiving and just after New Year's Day, a number surpassed only during the traditional summer months.

"It's alarming that we lose this many Soldiers in just these few short weeks year after year," said Command Sgt. Maj. William L. Gardner II, U.S. Army Combat Readiness Center. "The holidays are supposed to be a happy time, yet so many families and units are profoundly affected by these largely preventable tragedies."

While Soldiers should be aware of the driving hazards posed by winter weather and wildlife, the factors behind holiday PMV mishaps mirror those from any other time of year — speeding, failure to wear seat belts, alcohol and fatigue — but with one critical difference.

"The overall sense of urgency to get to that holiday location or party is probably the biggest factor," said Walt Beckman, USACRC loss prevention program manager. "Behavior-based errors play a much bigger role than anything else in these mishaps."

Unfortunately, arriving safely at the destination is only half the battle. Most fatal PMV mishaps during exodus occur in or around the Soldier's local area. Intersections with stop signs, rural highways and two-lane roads are particularly dangerous.

"When you combine a lack of signaling devices or poorly maintained roads with the behavioral errors the Army typically sees, it's a recipe for a fatal mishap," Beckman said.

In particular, drinking can lead to a cascade of indiscipline.

"Alcohol involved with speeding and failure to wear a seat belt are the most prevalent combinations reported in Army PMV mishaps year-round, not just during the holidays," Beckman said. "One bad decision leads to another."

According to Gardner, first-line supervisors are the best defense for these types of behaviors.

“Junior leaders sitting down with their Soldiers for old-fashioned counseling prior to leave or pass saves lives,” he said, explaining that the Travel Risk Planning System is a great conversation starter for supervisors and subordinates. “Although TRiPS is no longer an Army requirement before leave or pass, it’s one of the best tools a leader can use to open dialogue and assist Soldiers in making safe and well-planned travel.”

Leaders should also be the fallback for any Soldier who has had too much to drink, regardless of how far away his or her exodus location might be, Gardner said.

“Never be afraid to call your first sergeant or commander if you can't find someone else to drive you home,” he said. “Better to suffer some embarrassment than pay the price of a DUI, live with someone’s death on your conscience, or lose your own life.”

The USACRC recently released a communications campaign targeted to managing risk during the exodus period. The complete campaign, including feature articles, posters and public service announcements, is available at <https://safety.army.mil/MEDIA/Seasonal-Safety-Campaigns/Fall-Winter-Safety-2020>.