



Days of old, days of new

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Nearly 600 Soldiers died in accidents in 1979, the year I joined the Army. Unbelievably, that was an improvement from the previous year, when we recorded just shy of 700 accidental fatalities. Those are unconscionable numbers by today's standards, but back then, it was just the way things were. More than a decade passed before accidental losses tapered significantly, and far too many tragedies occurred in the meantime.

Thankfully, in today's Army, safety is the new normal. We no longer accept accidents as the cost of doing business or that "Soldiers will be Soldiers" in their off-duty time. Personal accountability has become a hallmark of our profession for Soldiers at all levels, and safety has consequently become an entrenched part of our everyday lives. I'm lucky to have witnessed this turnaround firsthand; the 1979 me couldn't have imagined the profound impact safety would have on my career or the lives of our Soldiers.

At any given time, leadership can be the most frustrating or most rewarding job in the Army, and some days it's both. But without a doubt, the historic low in accidental fatalities we achieved during fiscal 2013 was a victory for leaders everywhere. It was the culmination of a lot of hard work and more than a little frustration at the Army expecting us to do one more thing in the middle of this event called war. Reducing accidents while fulfilling our combat roles seemed impossible, but we did it both in theater and at home. That's what my grandmother called gumption, and you — our leaders, from the top to the bottom of the chain of command — possess it in spades.

I couldn't be more proud of all of you, especially as my time in the Army draws to a close. Every day I've spent with Soldiers has been a humbling, awe-inspiring experience, and I'm better for it. If I've learned anything after 35 years in the uniform, it's this: You have to listen to your Soldiers. Some leaders are born intuitive while others have to work harder at it, but wherever you fall on the spectrum, simply listening and reading between the lines will tell you most of what you need to know. This is an especially important attribute in safety, because it's rare that a Soldier will tell you he or she is acting in a risky manner. If you know your Soldiers, chances are you'll know when they're in trouble without them stating it.

While I transition out of the Army and toward retirement during the next few months, Command Sgt. Maj. Leeford Cain will be assuming my roles and responsibilities at the USACR/Safety Center. I have no doubt he will be a tremendous asset to the organization and our Soldiers, just as he's been at every previous assignment. Leeford is coming to us from U.S. Army Garrison, Ansbach, Germany, bringing with him many years of experience as a command sergeant major at the brigade and battalion levels. I know him personally and wholly believe he is the right choice to fill this position at this critical juncture. Please welcome Leeford in January and let him know what you need from him to keep your Soldiers safe.

It's been a long time coming, but now we know our Army can't thrive when risk runs unchecked through our ranks. Your tireless efforts for safety show in everything from all missions being performed to standard to a battle buddy calling a cab for a fellow Soldier after a night of drinking. We can't go back to the Army of 1979; we have nowhere to go but forward from here, into a future where no Soldier has to die in a preventable accident.

Goodbyes are bittersweet, and I will miss you all. But remember it's your turn — to lead, to shine, to make a real difference in a Soldier's life. Before you know it, 35 years will have come and gone and you'll be where I am today. And you'll realize, just as I have, that your Soldiers are the greatest legacy you could ever leave behind. Don't waste this precious opportunity, this gift called leadership.

Army Safe is Army Strong!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard D. Stidley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial 'R'.

Rick Stidley
Command Sergeant Major
U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center