



Leading from experience

A little more than two months into my time here at the USACR/Safety Center, I'm still wrapping my head around just how much safety means to our Soldiers and our Army. I've spent most of my career in the field, and while I treasure those experiences, it's incredibly humbling to come here and see firsthand how hard Soldiers work to keep their battle buddies safe. It's also inspired me to rethink my own approach to safety, especially as a leader with influence on younger Soldiers.

Many great leaders have said that one of the necessities of effective leadership is the ability to admit mistakes. We all know that's not easy; doesn't the very fact that we're leaders mean we know how to follow the rules and play it smart? After all, the Army has enough confidence in us to entrust Soldiers to our care. But just because we play it smart doesn't mean we always play it safe — sometimes there's a big difference.

I'm fortunate to be living proof of that. I say fortunate because, of all the unwise decisions I've ever made (and there have been many), one in particular could've easily killed me or someone else. Ironically, it happened at exactly the time the Army showed its greatest faith in me, as I was on my way to Fort Bliss, Texas, to attend the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy.

I decided to set out early from my hometown of Tampa, Fla., and drive the 1,600 miles to El Paso nonstop. Focus on "nonstop" for a second; that was my first mistake. Then mission creep set in while tying up loose ends at home, and before I knew it, it was almost lunch. Undeterred, I set out anyway, still focused on driving straight through. That was my second mistake, and they compounded quickly from there. Traffic delays, weather, you name it, it happened on that trip. By hour 17, it was nearly impossible to concentrate or stay awake. I pulled over at a hotel in San Antonio just before dusk and got some much-needed rest before making it to Fort Bliss later that day.

It didn't take long for me to realize it was neither wise nor responsible to undertake such a task without thinking things through. I was alone except for my suitcases, I'd never driven that route before, and I'm not a superhero who can function without sleep. Foolishly, I let my confidence in my presumed capabilities cloud the realities of my very human limitations. I learned that day you can't defy logic forever, and physiology will catch up with you sooner or later.

Even now, after nearly 10 years, that's not an easy story to tell. But I share it with you because I believe every leader should be sharing their safety stories with their Soldiers. We have an inherent responsibility to do the right thing and get the message to the men and women who look to us for counsel. Nothing sells a message like a personal story, and your experiences can help a Soldier make a better decision than you did in the same situation.

I'm excited to start this journey at the USACR/Safety Center and meet as many of you as possible. I hope I can be of help, and I encourage you to use every available tool to mitigate risk and preserve life in your formations. We have some awesome programs available at <https://safety.army.mil>, and I learn a little something from them every day. My mistake-laden trip to El Paso occurred during the earliest days of TRiPS, and had I had access to it then, I would've approached things very differently. Sometimes, we all need a wake-up call to make safer choices.

Please let me know how I can be of help, and until next time, remember to play it smart and safe!

Army Safe is Army Strong!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Leeford C. Cain". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'L' and a distinct 'C' and 'Cain'.

Leeford C. Cain
Command Sergeant Major
U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center