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National Safety Month: Operationalizing safety

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Today's Army leaders face a strategically complex, uncertain and changing environment. In keeping with the mission command philosophy, leaders must employ disciplined personal initiative to execute a shared understanding of the commander's intent for each mission. For this decentralized decision-making approach to be successful, leaders must build cohesive teams based on mutual trust, and plan for and accept a prudent amount of risk in the missions they undertake.

As a result, there exists a compelling need to operationalize safety. Commanders and the Soldiers they lead need to know how to routinely identify, mitigate and eliminate the hazards inherent in all their endeavors, whether in combat or at home station, both on duty and off duty. To that end, the U.S. Army Combat Readiness Center continues to research and develop innovative programs and tools that can help commanders make safety an integral part of everything their units do.

A few of the tools currently available that focus on preventing ground losses include the Range and Weapons Safety Toolbox, Driver's Training Toolbox, Off-Duty Safety Awareness Presentation, Army Readiness Assessment Program and Ground Risk Assessment Tool. Each of these products, and many other materials produced by the USACRC, assist commanders by creating awareness of potential safety-related issues and providing countermeasures and strategies for circumventing associated risks. Further, the tools themselves are not static. They are constantly evolving in light of lessons learned, changes in policy and user feedback. For instance, GRAT is currently being overhauled and expanded as the Joint Risk Assessment Tool to better serve the Army and support leaders from other branches of the military. The ODSAP is redesigned annually to reflect current accident statistics and freshen the training package with new videos and other pertinent safety information.

We cannot always prevent losing a Soldier to enemy activity in combat. The inherent risks of our profession are such that fatalities and injuries will persist, despite our best efforts. However, all too often we lose Soldiers outside of combat due to preventable accidents. It is these deaths we must stop. While the number of accidental fatalities continued to decline again last year to an all-time low of 127 at the end of fiscal 2014, among those losses were Soldiers who weren't properly restrained inside vehicles and negligent discharges of both military and privately owned weapons. Those are just two of the many types of accidents that could have been prevented. And though we tend to focus primarily on fatalities when discussing accidents, in reality, anytime someone in the force is away from the formation due to preventable injury, it is a loss to both unit cohesion and mission readiness.

As the number of deployments takes a shift and the Army moves into an era of rebalancing focus, it is certain the home station training environment tempo will increase. Thus, it is imperative that leaders

incorporate safe practices and hazard controls into every aspect of their units' daily activities. The key requirement for a positive shift in a unit's safety culture is engaged leadership from the bottom up. After all, even the very best risk assessment cannot prevent accidents if no one is willing to monitor and step in when an activity or situation becomes unsafe.

As the USACRC prepares to launch the Joint Risk Assessment Tool and other safety materials in fiscal 2016, we challenge commanders, leaders and Soldiers to embrace an environment of continuous learning and rigorous application of safety principles and practices. Don't just "check the block" when you've completed your risk assessment worksheet. Implement the plan and dare to be creative at operationalizing safety.