



Risk: a common denominator

Anyone who has ever had a college philosophy class is familiar with the question, “If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” Multiple interpretations of the answer have been given by great minds through the years, but one simple premise is this: The lion’s share of human perception is made up of only what we actually observe. Trees fall in the forest all the time, but it’s not an “event” unless someone is there to see or hear it.

Unfortunately, that’s the way a lot of people — leaders and Soldiers included — think about risky behavior. If they don’t see it right in front of them, it must not be happening. With the most indisciplined Soldiers, there generally are some indicators of risk in their performance on duty. Reaching them isn’t necessarily easy, but leaders are at least aware of the problem and can address it. They make the noise, so to speak, and therefore get needed attention.

However, those Soldiers who don’t fall into the traditional indisciplined category but still take occasional risks are the unheard trees in the forest. If a Soldier executes every mission to standard on duty but dies in a preventable accident after hours, his or her leaders might understandably be shocked. Since they’d never seen the Soldier make an infraction, they assumed risky behavior wasn’t an issue.

I started thinking about this during a distracted driving event the USACR/Safety Center recently sponsored at Fort Rucker. Soldier and civilian volunteers rotated through a controlled course where they encountered unexpected obstacles while driving with some distraction, ranging from talking on their cellphones to switching a CD to dealing with loud passengers inside the vehicle. Most were surprised at just how much a simple distraction affects their reaction time, a realization that often doesn’t come about until an accident or near miss occurs. Fortunately, our participants learned that lesson traveling at 10 and 15 mph, a much more forgiving situation than real life allows.

This exercise clearly showed commonplace, well-ingrained behaviors are indeed risky — and the scary thing is we all needlessly accept that risk from time to time. Who hasn’t checked their phone when a message alert comes through? Even if you don’t reply, you’re still distracted by reading the message. Have you visited a drive-through for a quick meal on a long road trip, eating while making ground? If we’re doing it, you know your Soldiers are as well, even the best and brightest in your ranks.

Risk is pervasive, and we’ll never completely eliminate it from our everyday lives. We can manage it, however, and teach our Soldiers to make smart risk decisions. Accidents sometimes happen that are out of our control, but no one has to be a casualty of personal negligence. Training, discipline and standards will serve us and our Soldiers well if we follow through and ensure they do too, particularly when no one is looking.

Thank you all for what you do every day, and I wish each of you a safe and happy Independence Day. Every birthday America celebrates is a tribute to our men and women in uniform and those working behind the scenes to keep them safe. Please let me know how I can help in your endeavors, and be sure to check <https://safety.army.mil> regularly for the latest safety information and risk

management tools. A distracted driving awareness package, "So you think you can drive ... distracted?," based on the Fort Rucker event, was just added to the site and contains materials to help you start the conversation with your Soldiers.

Today and every day ... stay safe and think smart!

Army Safe is Army Strong!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Timothy J. Edens". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "T" and "E".

TIMOTHY J. EDENS
Brigadier General, USA
Commanding