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Be a 'wreck-less' driver this winter

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An Army accident report last winter read: "Soldiers hit a patch of black ice after crossing a bridge and spun out of control, going into a narrow ditch and rolling the vehicle one complete time. … Soldiers were traveling, all wearing their seat belts. All Soldiers were transported to local hospital … treated and released."

This group of Army National Guardsmen encountered a little extra "surprise" as they were driving to their weekend drill. Fortunately, they chose to wear their seat belts and walked away from the experience wiser and none the worse for wear. But Guardsmen headed to drill aren't the only Soldiers who will be on the road this winter.

With the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, many Soldiers and their Families will be on the road to visit family and friends. However, unlike the Guardsmen above, your trip doesn't have to end up with you in a hospital and your car in a ditch. The "Three P's of Safe Winter Driving" from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's 20th Safe and Sober Planner should help you make your way safety to your destination.

Prepare for the trip

- Maintain your car. Check battery and tire tread, keep your windows clear, put no-freeze fluid in the window washer reservoir, check your antifreeze.
- Have the right equipment on hand. Flashlight, jumper cables, abrasive material (sand, kitty litter, even floor mats), shovel, snow brush and ice scraper, warning devices (like flares) and blankets. For long trips, add food and water, medication and cell phone.
- Have a stall plan. If your car stalls, stay with it, don't over exert yourself, put bright markers on antenna or windows and shine dome light. If you run your car, clear exhaust pipe and run it just enough to stay warm.

Plan your route

- Allow plenty of time and check the weather and leave early if necessary.
- Be familiar with the maps and directions.
- Let others know your route and arrival time.

Practice cold weather driving

- During daylight, rehearse maneuvers slowly on the ice or snow in an empty lot.
- Steer into a skid.
- Know what your brakes will do: stomp on antilock brakes, pump non-antilock brakes.
- Stopping distances are longer on water-covered ice and ice.

Protect yourself

- Buckle up and use child safety seats properly.
- Don't idle for a long time with the windows up or in an enclosed space.
- Never place a rear-facing infant seat in front of an airbag.
- Children 12 and under are much safer in the backseat.
- Sit at least 10 inches from an airbag.

Prevent crashes

- Drugs and alcohol never mix with driving.
- Slow down and increase distances between cars.
- Keep your eyes open for pedestrians walking in the road.
- Avoid fatigue. Get plenty of rest before the trip, stop at least every three hours, and rotate drivers if possible.

As a Soldier, you have the Travel Risk Planning System (TRiPS) available to help you mitigate the risk of every road trip. All you have to do is log into TRiPS and follow the easy directions to see areas where you can increase your margin of safety. By taking an overall look at your travel plans, TRiPS can alert you to dangers you may not be aware of and, at the same time, evaluate the risk level of your trip. Using TRiPs to help you avoid hazards from the comfort of your warm home beats having to deal with those hazards on the cold road.

For more fall and winter safety tips and to access TRiPS, visit https://safety.army.mil.

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