



DISABLED VEHICLE MISHAPS

“Why is it that every time my car breaks down, it’s in front of an auto mechanic’s shop.”

— said no one, ever.

Breaking down in your car or motorcycle can be a major annoyance and can turn deadly in an instant. When you pull over and get out of your car, your chances of a severe or fatal accident rise exponentially. At that point, you’re a pedestrian and the statistics are not in your favor. Pedestrian deaths rose 54 percent over the past decade compared to a 13 percent increase for all other traffic deaths. In 2020, 17 percent of pedestrian deaths occurred on freeways.* Tragically, some of our Sailors and Marines were among those numbers.

There are many reasons you may need to pull off the road; dead battery, out of gas, overheating, flat tire, to name a few. Some issues can be an easy fix and some more complex, but when they happen on the interstate and you have cars and large trucks speeding past within inches of you, the simplest task can take a dangerous turn. Being caught off guard by vehicle problems on the road can lead to lapses in sound decision-making, further adding to the risk. We’ve found some great tips to stay safe if you find yourself on the roadside with a disabled vehicle or motorcycle, but first, here are a few examples of why you should read and heed them.



- A Sailor was driving at the beachfront when his engine started overheating. He pulled over to check the coolant in the car. He opened the radiator cap without realizing the car had not cooled off enough and his right arm was sprayed with hot coolant. The Sailor called a tow truck driver to have the vehicle towed closer to their residence and received a ride to a local medical center where he was treated for burns. *This mishap was a painful way to be reminded that engine coolant is scalding. We may feel a sense of urgency in situations like this, but as we’ve said before, “being in a hurry will only get you to the emergency room faster.”*

- While driving to the Gym, the Sailor’s horn jammed and he pulled over to the side of the road. The Sailor tried to pull the fuse to disarm the horn, but could not. As he walked from the front of the car to the driver’s side door, he was struck by a passing vehicle. Despite ending up on the roof of the other vehicle, the Sailor is lucky he escaped with only superficial injuries. *Having the horn continue to sound isn’t the worst thing to happen on the road, albeit annoying. This Sailor likely could have found a safer place to troubleshoot the issue. If you can get off the highway, please do.*

- At 0200, a Sailor was driving down an on-ramp and swerved to miss an ice patch, lost control, and struck the guard rail. The Sailor exited his vehicle to inspect the damage. And, upon returning to his car, he was hit by a truck going down the on-ramp. The report doesn’t detail the extent of the Sailor’s injuries, only that it was a Class C mishap. The report did recommend using flashers to warn other traffic, and at 0200, that’s even more important. *Again, if you can get to a safer place to assess the damage, do it.*

- At approximately 0320, a Marine pulled his vehicle onto the shoulder of the interstate to assist another vehicle that had spun out and was partially obstructing the right lane. The crash also disabled the vehicle’s lights. When the Marine exited his vehicle, a truck struck the spun out vehicle, which in turn struck the Marine, resulting in fatal head trauma. *This type of selfless response to people in need*

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is what Marines do, but we can't help if we become a victim in the process. Our service members take measured risks daily while on duty. Please do the same while off duty. Call 911 and stay in your car if at all possible.

- A Marine was driving on the interstate at approximately 2200 local time when he hit an unknown object in the roadway. The object became lodged under the vehicle causing a grinding noise, so the Marine slowed his car and pulled over on the right shoulder. Upon inspecting his car, he could not see the object but thought it may still be lodged under the car. He drove slowly on the shoulder, noting no grinding noise or other issues. Assuming the object was no longer there, the Marine began to pull off the shoulder and back onto the roadway. In the process, another vehicle struck his car from behind, causing him to hit his head on his steering wheel. He was escorted to the hospital by a fellow Marine, where he received two stitches for a laceration over his eye. *Pulling off the highway at night is particularly dangerous and getting back on can be even worse.*
- The narrative is short in this report, but it speaks volumes about disabled vehicle safety: “while stopped on the side of the highway to fix a flat tire, the service member was struck by a motor vehicle. He sustained numerous fatal injuries.” *There's not much else to say here other than this tragic accident is yet another example of how dangerous (and deadly) any roadside activities are. This tragedy was another opportunity to call for some assistance from highway patrol or roadside assistance that could have saved a Sailor's life.*

Key Takeaways

Many insurance companies and organizations offer tips on roadside emergency safety. Here are some of the most common recommendations from www.defensivedriving.org:

1. **Take action immediately.** As soon as you notice trouble, start moving towards the shoulder. Otherwise, you may become unavoidably stopped in the middle of traffic. Pull as far away from the traffic as possible.
2. **Get as far off the road as possible.** This one should be a no-brainer. The farther from the traffic you can get, the better. If possible, take the next exit and find a safer location to stop.
3. **Warn others you're having trouble.** Turn your hazard lights on. Use safety cones or flares if you have them. If you don't, get them.
4. **Call 911 or roadside assistance and stay in your vehicle if practical.** If you don't have a roadside assistance service, or if they will take some time to get to you, call 911. Don't be shy to ask for help, police and highway safety crews can offer visibility and protection and assist you in returning to the highway safely. Most states have free safety service patrols that can help with essential services to get you back on the highway safely.
5. **Don't exit your car until it's safe, if at all.** In an emergency, you may want to get out and investigate or assist others, but be aware of the traffic, and only do so if absolutely necessary. Exit the vehicle on the side away from traffic and move to the safest location away from the traffic as possible.
6. **Be prepared.** Have a vehicle emergency kit that includes, at a minimum, a flashlight, road flares, and reflective markers to help make you more visible. Any decent web search will show you many types of emergency kits and what's in them. Finally, the best preparation is prevention. Keep tabs on your fuel gauge, ensure all fluids are topped off; don't try to get eight years out of a five-year battery, and have your vehicle regularly serviced. You can't plan for every possible emergency, but you sure can cut down the odds by accounting for most of them **before** you get on the road.
7. **On being a good Samaritan.** Sometimes the best course of action is to call 911 and let the professionals respond. If you're not a first responder to an accident, the few extra minutes for help to arrive shouldn't be an issue. If you must stop in an emergency, follow all tips above.

And remember, “Let's be careful out there”

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