



NAVAL SAFETY COMMAND

SAFETY AWARENESS DISPATCH



SA 23-01

Winter Driving Mishaps

“People talk about how horrible others drive in the snow, but no one owns up to being THAT person” — Anonymous

Each year in the U.S., nearly 900 people die and nearly 76,000 people are injured in vehicle accidents during snow or sleet according to the Federal Highway Administration. With our service members deployed around the globe, many live in areas that receive at least some measure of winter weather conditions. In the U.S., 70% of the roadways are located in regions that average five inches of snowfall annually. Those regions are also home to 70% of the U.S. population, so you’ve likely been in a winter weather driving situation at some point in your life. If you haven’t, read on because the hard learned lessons of our winter drivers apply to rain and a host of other degraded road conditions.



- **Just the Fax.** A Sailor was heading to work to fax some papers, ignoring the base-wide shut down due to winter weather. Validating the call to shut down the base, the Sailor hit a patch of black ice, skidded off the road and struck a tree. He received two days SIQ for strained muscles in his back. — *Faxing paperwork isn’t a valid reason to travel in weather that’s bad enough to shut down the base. If travel is an absolute must, slow down and account for the potential unseen black ice.*
- **Was it Worth it?** A Sailor went to visit his children one weekend. On his return drive, the road conditions worsened with snow and ice, so he slowed his speed to 35 mph in a 65 mph speed zone (*good call, but*). Unfortunately, this action alone wasn’t enough to prevent him from losing control of the vehicle, sliding off the road and rolling his car onto its roof. He received multiple cuts and bruises, but was otherwise fine. This Sailor ignored reports of worsening weather distributed to all hands prior to the weekend. — *If you love your kids, do the right thing and postpone your visit if the weather is so bad that your command issues severe weather warnings. They will understand.*
- **Bridge Ices Before Road.** A senior Marine NCO was riding his motorcycle on the interstate at 1800 (*dark*) traveling at approximately 70 mph. The Marine slid on ice that formed on an overpass and slid into four vehicles that also crashed due to the ice. He continued to slide, hitting a guardrail and coming to a stop as more vehicles slid on the black ice behind him in a 13-car pileup. Lucky to be alive, this Marine escaped with minor whiplash and a concussion. The report notes that the Marine “planned and looked at the weather prior to leaving,” but made the decision to travel despite icing conditions. — *Icy roads are challenging enough without traveling them on only two wheels. If you’re a rider, consider an alternate vehicle choice during potential icy conditions. And remember, during potential icing conditions, the road may be dry one minute and a sheet of ice the next. Slow down.*
- **Arrive Alive.** A Marine was driving across the country during his return trip from leave. At some point in the trip, it began to snow and “turned into a snowstorm,” according to the report. The Marine continued driving for another two and a half hours in the storm when another vehicle cut him off. Upon attempting to avoid hitting the other car, the Marine lost control of his vehicle and crashed into a concrete median. The Marine was uninjured, but his vehicle was un-drivable. — *If inclement weather is in the forecast, plan for delays and keep your chain of command updated. Don’t push through.*
- **In a Fog.** A Sailor was driving to work in the morning in fog and rain. Due to the reduced visibility, he didn’t see standing water on the highway, which caused him to hydroplane off the road and flip his car. At the emergency room, he received 26 stitches for head lacerations. — *While this mishap wasn’t in snow or*

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ice, standing water can be just as dangerous. If it's raining and foggy, plan for standing water and that you might not see it. Maintain a safe speed for the weather conditions (put another way — slow down!)

- **Tragedy in an instant.** A Sailor was driving on the interstate with another Sailor passenger. Heavy rains occurred throughout the day causing reduced visibility. Despite the deteriorated weather conditions, the Sailor was driving at high speed and “swerving in and out of traffic,” according to the report. The Sailor lost control of the vehicle and veered off the road, striking a concrete barrier and ejecting the passenger. When the vehicle came to rest on the shoulder ahead of an exit ramp, the driver exited the car to assist his passenger when he was fatally struck by another vehicle. — *There are a few tragic lessons here: 1) Swerving through traffic and speeding are unsafe no matter the road conditions: 2) The passenger was not wearing a seatbelt, which would likely have kept her in the car, and: 3) Exiting your car on the side of a highway is dangerous in any situation. Your sense of urgency could cloud your judgment, so don't exit the car until it is safe. See more about roadside safety in our safety awareness dispatch SA 22-18 Disabled Vehicle Mishaps.*



Key Takeaways

Vehicle accidents are the leading cause of off-duty fatalities in the Navy and Marine Corps and most are preventable. Inclement weather increases your risk on the road and taking the road conditions seriously is a good first step to being a safer driver. In addition to our takeaways here, check out more tips on winter driving in the Naval Safety Command's fall and winter safety presentation in the stand down section of our public website here: <https://navalsafetycommand.navy.mil/Stand-Down/Safety-Stand-Down/>.

1. **All wheel drive does not mean all wheel stop.** Technical advances such as driving assists and traction control make us safer on the road for sure, but no amount of technology can replace common sense. Traction control will do little good when you're following someone too close or traveling at excessive speed on an icy road. Don't allow those fancy features to make you complacent on the road.
2. **Seatbelts, people, seatbelts.** In the 21st century, why are we still reminding people to wear seatbelts? Some of the lessons learned injuries could likely have been much worse if the drivers and passengers weren't wearing seat belts. The Sailor who was ejected from the car likely wouldn't have been if she'd been wearing one. For unknown reasons, non-use of seat belts is higher now than in pre-COVID 19 pandemic times according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Please buckle up.
3. **You're not in the Iditarod.** We understand that snowstorms can cramp your plans, but car accidents can ruin your plans completely, or worse. Follow the weather and plan your travel to avoid being caught in a storm. Leave the blizzard travel to the dog mushers of Alaska.
4. **Drive Sober.** Winter driving is challenging enough without being under the influence of alcohol, but many drivers ignore that fact, and the law. Twenty-eight percent of all traffic fatalities involve alcohol, according to the NHTSA. Don't do it ... period.

And remember, "Let's be careful out there"