



NAVAL SAFETY COMMAND

SAFETY AWARENESS DISPATCH



SA 23-36

Winter Driving II

Winter driving can be a challenging and potentially hazardous experience. For many of us, the colder season will bring rain, snow, and icy roads, so we have to change our driving habits to keep from crunching the car/truck/etc. or getting hurt. Every year, more than 1,300 people are killed and 116,800 people are injured in crashes on snowy, slushy or icy roads.¹ We had a bad rise in Sailor and Marine motor vehicle fatalities in FY 23, so let's start the new year with a safer record. Please read and remember the hard lessons our Sailors and Marines learned in these examples we pulled from our database. We hope they'll "drive home" (see what we did there 😊) the importance of safe winter weather driving.



- **A Bad Decision.** On a cold winter day, a Sailor and his shipmate decided to head north on the interstate in a truck they borrowed. Heavy rains froze on the roads the night before, but the Sailor thought driving would be safe (*he couldn't have been more wrong*). With minimal experience driving in icy conditions, he found himself in unfamiliar territory. As he attempted to navigate the icy highway, he felt the tires slipping and overreacted, slamming on the brakes and causing the truck to slide out of control. The vehicle spun 180 degrees, hitting the guardrail. Fortunately, both Sailors escaped with no injuries. —*The Sailors should have used better judgment before borrowing a truck and driving in bad weather. The driver didn't have the skill or experience for the road conditions. Of all the maneuvers to try on icy roads, slamming on the brakes is not one of them. Instead, take your foot off the gas and make gentle stops and turns.*
- **A Costly Chance.** A Sailor and her husband went to visit relatives during the holidays. They decided to drive back home during a winter storm to make it to work the following day. The weather deteriorated as they proceeded down the expressway, forcing them to pull over at a rest stop. After about 45 minutes of waiting (*and the weather not waning*), they resumed their drive. While heading down the highway in icy conditions, the Sailor lost control of the car and hit a guardrail, damaging the front end of the vehicle and tearing off the bumper. The couple loaded the bumper into the car and pressed on with the drive home, un-phased by their 180-degree spin into the rail. —*We've seen this scenario of poor planning and unnecessary risk-taking play out many times in our database. Don't risk your safety to save a day of leave. Keep your supervisor informed of your travel situation; they should understand. It's better to get back later than not at all.*
- **Rushing to the Ski Slopes.** A group of five Marines drove to a ski resort to enjoy a weekend of skiing. Anxious to get on the slopes, they planned to go night skiing that evening. They piled in the car that night, ready to hit the slopes. The driver fastened his seatbelt and reversed the car before the other Marines could buckle up. The car started sliding *forward* on the icy pavement (*yes, the opposite direction from where they were going; it must've been on a decent hill*), causing the driver to panic, slamming on the gas pedal to stop the slide. The ice and hill didn't care if the tires were spinning in reverse or stopped—the car continued to slide forward until it rolled off an embankment, sending the Marines tumbling. The car flipped over several times before stopping, resting on the hood of the vehicle. The Marines suffered extensive injuries, but everyone survived. —*This example was, hopefully, a rare incident. Still, there are a couple of things we can take from it: 1) They should have noticed the ice-packed parking lot, which should have prompted a risk assessment to reconsider making the night ski venture; 2) Do a seatbelt check before putting the car in gear, because you never know how quickly things can go "downhill." Pun intended.*

¹ Statistics from the Federal Highway Administration, 1 Feb 2023.

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- **To Stay or Not to Stay (in the car)** A Sailor on his way to work swerved to avoid a patch of ice on the road. Despite his maneuver—or possibly because of it; swerving is probably not the best course of action around ice—he lost control of his vehicle, colliding with the guardrail. The Sailor got out of the car on the icy ramp to inspect the damage, and as he attempted to return to the car, a truck struck him. He suffered head and body trauma and spent 12 days in the hospital. —*Stay in your car and call for emergency services in a roadside emergency. Be vigilant on the roads and roadsides, or as we often say in the military, “keep your head on a swivel.” For more about roadside safety, see Safety Awareness Dispatch SA 22-18 Disabled Vehicle Mishaps.*



- **Honey, Did You Check the Forecast?** A Sailor was returning home after dropping his wife off at a relative's house a few hours away. The wind-driven snow created reduced visibility and icy roads. He was traveling about 30 mph when he lost control and crashed into a ditch, destroying the front of the vehicle. The Sailor escaped with minor injuries. —*The weather forecast showed storm warnings for the area, but the Sailor (and his wife) decided to drive anyway. A little risk management would have saved the Sailor some back pain and both of them a banged-up car; and it could've been much worse. Ask yourself, is the risk worth the reward or not? We're thinking, not.*
- **How Do I Stop This Thing?** A Sailor was driving a little too fast on snowy roads before attempting to stop at a red light. He applied the brakes, but the car began to slide, so he braked even harder. His next thought was to turn the wheel to the left to avoid hitting the car in front of him, but he was too late and too fast, and his right front hit the left rear of the car ahead. No injuries were reported. —*There's generally two ways to stop on ice: 1) Keep sliding until you hit something, or 2) Slow down and keep more space from the next vehicle (or obstacle) to give your care time and space to stop. Even if you have all-wheel drive, remember that doesn't mean all-wheel stop.*

Key Takeaways

As we enter the winter months, remember (and remind your people about) the risks of driving in inclement weather. With a little risk management and planning, most of these mishaps are avoidable. Please visit our site and check on more tips about fall and winter safety:

<https://navalsafetycommand.navy.mil/Stand-Down/Safety-Stand-Down/>.

1. **Prepare for winter driving.** Inspect your tires, wipers, brakes, antifreeze levels and heater. Clean your headlights and test your battery. Understand your vehicle's traction control feature so you know what to expect. For a comprehensive list, check out the Highway Traffic Safety Administration's winter driving tips here: <https://www.nhtsa.gov/winter-driving-tips>.
2. **Have a plan...and a plan B.** Check the weather before and during travel to avoid getting caught in a storm. Before you go, keep blankets, coats, flashlights and snacks in your vehicle in case you get stranded. Leave with plenty of time so you're not in a rush. Have a backup plan (Plan B); it can be the difference between arriving safely at your destination or not arriving at all.
3. **Give some space.** Leave plenty of space between you and other vehicles—and Slow Down. As you go faster, the distance should go up too. The National Safety Council recommends a minimum of three seconds following distance. To check, pick a sign or marker that the vehicle in front of you passes. Count how many seconds it takes before you pass the same spot. If it's less than three seconds, you're too close.
4. **Curb the Alcohol.** As always, we have to reinforce sober driving because too many traffic fatalities in the naval services were alcohol-related. Navigating winter road conditions is hard enough without being impaired...and it's illegal...and we don't want you to hit **us** while we're out there!

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

This product is posted on the NAVSAFECOM public site at <https://navalsafetycommand.navy.mil>

Send feedback to: NAVSAFECOM_SAFETY_AWARENESS@us.navy.mil