



Naval Safety Command

LESSONS LEARNED



LL 22-06

MARINE LEFT IN DESERT - FATALITY (ROTHER MISHAP)

"He covered approximately 17 miles ... He made a heroic effort, and he almost succeeded."

Introduction

There are seminal events in history that alter the way we think and operate. The aircraft mishap and fire aboard the USS Forrestal during the Vietnam War was one of these events. The near sinking of an entire ship due to an errant rocket caused us to rethink how we approach Naval Aviation safety.

For Marine Corps ground safety, the seminal event didn't come for another 20 years. This event was the death of Lance Corporal Jason Rother in Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center (MCAGCC) Twentynine Palms when he was forgotten at a road guide post. This tragedy and the reflections of General Al Gray, Commandant of the Marine Corps at the time, forced the Marine Corps to reevaluate how they make decisions and accept risk at various echelons of leadership.

Anyone who has trained in this inhospitable environment has likely heard reference of LCpl Rother in their desert survival brief. As time passes, fewer and fewer Marines have been to Twentynine Palms and learned of this unfortunate event. Those Marines who have heard of it may not know the full story. If we allow the details of events like this to be forgotten, we doom ourselves and our Marines, to the risk of similar events reoccurring. We must continue to revisit and retell the narrative of how this Marine was left behind.

The information in this lessons learned product was assembled from publicly-available, open-source documents including the official command investigation. It does not contain information from any safety investigation report.¹

Road March Planning

This event occurred during a Combined Arms Exercise (CAX), the precursor to the present-day Integrated Training Exercise (ITX). The battalion landing team (BLT) conducted various training events leading up to the culminating CAX event. Just as ITX is now, these events were physically demanding, but there were no serious incidents. LCpl Rother experienced a state of mild heat exhaustion during the unit's platoon live-fire attack, but was deemed fit for duty by a corpsman and continued training.

After 12 days of training, the battalion consolidated for the three-day CAX. On the first day, 29 Aug, they attacked and seized a strong-point position. On the afternoon of the second day, the unit received its Fragmentary Order (FragO) that they needed to conduct a motorized movement to set up a deliberate defense against a likely enemy attack.

The battalion commanding officer (CO), LtCol Robeson, had the route planned and then issued his own FragO to his companies. His intent was to emplace road guides at four positions along their movement route. After deliberating with key leaders, he tasked his four companies, India, Kilo, Lima, and Bravo (a tank company attachment) to provide two Marines each for road guides and, except for India, two additional Marines to serve as a quartering party in the next assembly area. India company was an exception, since they were being helicopter lifted to the area and would not need a quartering party. A total of 14 Marines were required for the road guide and quartering party detail.



¹Editor's note: Due to the large number of involved personnel, the lessons learned narrative includes both individual names and duty assignments to provide greater clarity of events. The names are unchanged (vice using pseudonyms) to maintain continuity with other published sources. The names of these personnel have been widely published in public forums in reports, studies and news articles over many years.

MARINE LEFT IN DESERT - FATALITY (ROTHER MISHAP)

At the FragO meeting, the heavy weapons platoon commander, 1stLt Lawson, was tasked with conducting route reconnaissance and emplacing the road guide detail. The motor-transport (Motor-T) platoon commander, 2ndLt Fossett, was tasked with picking up the road guides as the end of the convoy passed. The BLT logistics officer, Capt Edwards briefed this plan, but there was no clear guidance or decision on how the Marines would be returned to their parent companies once the road march was complete. The command investigation found that each company assumed their Marines would be dropped off, but there was no coordination of who would be responsible for ensuring that task was effectively done and personnel were accounted for.

Key Decision Point: The leadership in the FragO meeting was understandably focused on the operational side of this mission, but with so many key personnel present, someone should have identified the absence of personnel-accountability planning, which could have prevented this mishap.

As the leaders left this FragO meeting, the confusion grew in the difficulty of hastily executing a battalion road march at night. Immediately after the FragO issuance, the adjacent artillery battalion commander, LtCol Spain, met with the BLT Commander to discuss their respective motor marches, and they identified the potential problem of mingled road guides since a portion of their routes overlapped. They agreed to travel on separate axes of the main supply route (MSR) and to have a 20-minute spacing between their convoys. LtCol Spain met with Capt Edwards to discuss this agreement and brief him on the marking plan for the artillery battalion road guides to prevent confusion when each unit's Marines were picked up. Capt Edwards did not recall this meeting, however, and this information was not relayed to the BLT Marines assigned to collect the road guides.

Further friction was caused as the road guide and quartering party detail was put together. The Bravo company commander, Capt Sheehan, sent his Gunnery Sergeant to ensure the Marines were properly handed off and tasked, but he thought he only needed to send two Marines for his quartering party, despite the extended discussion that each company also needed to send two Marines for road guides. The Lima company commander identified four Marines for the detail, as required, but when his executive officer (XO) attempted to deliver them to 1stLt Lawson, he could not find him. He instead entrusted them to the battalion adjutant, believing he would bring them to 1stLt Lawson. The adjutant never made contact with 1stLt Lawson, however, and kept the Lima company Marines with him during the movement. The two India company Marines were assigned and effectively reported to 1stLt Lawson. Kilo Company's four Marines were assigned, but were delivered two at a time, and were the last Marines to report to 1stLt Lawson. At this point only eight of the 14 Marines required for the road guide and quartering party detail were present. 1stLt Lawson never did a collective brief for this detail before they departed, because the Marines came in fragmented groups. He instead briefed them individually as they were posted along the route.



Road Guide Placement

At 1900 on 30 Aug, 1stLt Lawson's designated departure time, only two Marines for the detail had reported. Ten minutes later the BLT XO, Maj Holm, confronted him to ask why he had not left yet, since they were losing daylight quickly. At 1920, with only eight of the 14 Marines needed for the road guide and quartering party detail (four from Kilo, two from Bravo, two from India), 1stLt Lawson decided to depart with what he had. In his haste to set off, he neglected to provide a roster of road guides to the BLT logistics officer as he requested, so Capt Edwards was never aware that the total number of Marines to be picked up was different than planned. The BLT commander was also never notified that 1stLt Lawson left with fewer than the prescribed number of Marines.

MARINE LEFT IN DESERT - FATALITY (ROTHER MISHAP)

Ten minutes after departing, 1stLt Lawson's convoy reached an intersection that did not appear on his map or designated route. He directed his vehicles to turn off the MSR and encountered a fork, where he took the left route which most closely followed the MSR. 1stLt Lawson continued for another mile and stopped at a prominent rock feature on the side of the road that was approximately 400 meters from the intersection marked as BLT checkpoint 1. He posted LCpl Rother from Kilo Company at this location. LCpl Key, also from Kilo, got out of the vehicle to post with LCpl Rother, but was told to re-board the vehicle to post at a separate position. Their fellow Kilo Company Marines pointed out they were directed by their company leadership to post in pairs, but 1stLt Lawson responded "I'm the lieutenant and you're the lance corporal." They boarded the vehicles and moved 400 meters down the road to the intersection which was marked on the map as checkpoint 1. It was here that LCpl Key was posted. Key tried to reiterate they were supposed to be posted in pairs, but 1stLt Lawson replied that he knew what he was doing. Neither LCpl Key nor Rother received guidance on how they were to be picked up or returned to Kilo Company.

Key Decision Point: 1stLt Lawson had two opportunities here to identify his error. Had he taken a tactical pause and considered the protests of these junior Marines, he may have recognized his mistake. He instead allowed either his rank or the operational pressure to cloud his judgment.

LCpl Key was posted 20 minutes after sunset near the end of evening nautical twilight. The remainder of the route recon and posting of road guides was conducted in darkness. 1stLt Lawson continued to BLT checkpoint 2, where he found the artillery unit had selected the same spot for their checkpoint 2 and posted their personnel there. 1stLt Lawson decided to continue without posting any of his detail in that location.



As he continued, 1stLt Lawson determined the northern axis of the MSR was too overgrown and that the BLT should utilize the southern axis. He was likely unaware the BLT commander had intended for the BLT and artillery unit to use separate axes. Due to Lawson's decision, both units used the same axis of the MSR.

When Lawson's platoon reached checkpoint 3, he posted the two Marines from Bravo Company, despite their company leadership intending them to be used as their quartering party. Lawson told them they would be identified by their chemlights and that the last vehicle in the battalion convoy would stop to pick them up. He then continued to checkpoint 4 and posted the two India Company Marines, giving them the same guidance. Since Lawson lacked the full 14-man detail that was planned, he only had the two remaining Kilo Company Marines for quartering parties. He posted these Marines in the battalion assembly area to serve as a quartering party to the lead element of the battalion convoy, but there were no quartering parties for the individual companies.

At this point 1stLt Lawson seemed to have realized to some degree something was wrong, because he decided to send his navigator to backtrack the convoy route and ensure the road guides knew to get on the last vehicle of the convoy. He further emphasized to ensure the guides at checkpoint 1 (LCpl Keys, with LCpl Rother another 400 meters further) knew to link up with each other at whichever position the convoy passed. His instructions may have averted the incident, but the navigator departed to backtrack the route only 30 minutes before the battalion convoy began the road march. The navigator only made it to checkpoints 3 and 4 before encountering the lead element of the BLT convoy, at which time he turned back to the final assembly area. He never reached the Marines at checkpoint 1 and 2. There are conflicting reports from 1stLt Lawson and his navigator about what was

MARINE LEFT IN DESERT - FATALITY (ROTHER MISHAP)

reported upon his return. The navigator stated he reported his inability to reach checkpoint 1, but 1stLt Lawson's recollection was that his navigator said the Marines had already been picked up by the convoy when he reached checkpoint 1. Regardless of differing recollections, in reality they had not been picked up.

Road Guide Pickup

While 1stLt Lawson was emplacing the road guide detail, the rest of the BLT prepared for the road march. The logistics officer, Capt Edwards briefed the Motor-T platoon commander, 2ndLt Fossett on the details of the convoy and guidance on picking up the road guides. He stated they would be marked with chemlights at the pre-selected checkpoints in pairs and recommended that Fossett put his best driver in the pick-up vehicle. He further emphasized to ensure all Marines with chemlights were picked up, since 1stLt Lawson had not provided a road-guide roster. However, Capt Edwards did not discuss the artillery battalion convoy that would be following them, thinking there would be no conflict.

Capt Edwards also briefly discussed keeping custody of the road guides until the morning when Motor-T would refuel the companies, but there was no specific direction on how this was to happen. 2ndLt Fossett assumed the road guides would remain in the supply vehicles and return to their parent companies the following day.

Key Decision Point: Not receiving a roster for accountability from 1stLt Lawson should have triggered reaction to remedy this issue. Obtaining a roster of who was dropped off could have been done over the radio before the convoy moved or by face-to-face verification with 1stLt Lawson after the convoy.

2ndLt Fossett subsequently conducted his own planning, assigned a driver and assistant driver – LCpl Barrett and LCpl Kimble – to the pick-up vehicle, and briefed his Marines. LCpl Barrett was present for this briefing and understood he was supposed to pick up pairs of Marines who would be identified with chemlights, but he did not know the number of Marines he was expected to collect. He was also unaware of the separate artillery convoy, since 2ndLt Fossett was likewise unaware. LCpl Kimble was not present for the brief, and had to be briefed by LCpl Barrett minutes before departing. From this brief, Kimble believed their vehicle would be the last opportunity for any road guide to be picked up.

After final preparations, the BLT convoy departed with LCpl Barrett's truck at the end followed only by SSgt Dozier, the Motor-T chief in a Humvee. The first complication with the road guide pick up occurred ten minutes after the convoy started. The artillery unit's first checkpoint was on the BLT's route before their own first checkpoint. As LCpl Barrett passed the artillery unit road guides, he and LCpl Kimble convinced them to board the vehicle, believing they were the last opportunity for them to be picked up (not aware of the other artillery convoy).

The next issue occurred at the BLT checkpoint 1. The battalion convoy didn't turn onto the fork that Lawson did during his route recon and road guide posting, so they never passed LCpl Rother's position on the side road. When they reached LCpl Key's position at checkpoint 1, LCpl Barrett stopped to pick him up. Reports about this pick up also conflict. LCpl Barrett and Kimble stated all road guides they collected were in pairs, and they were never told of another Marine that needed to be picked up. On the other hand, LCpl Key was obviously alone at his post, and he said that as he boarded he told the pick-up vehicle drivers there was another Marine that needed to be picked up. He encountered the artillery unit Marines onboard, who stated they had been picked up by the wrong vehicle. LCpl Key then assumed one of the artillery vehicles would pick up LCpl Rother. Regardless of whose statement is accurate, the reality is LCpl Rother was left at his position.

Key Decision Point: While it was not LCpl Key's duty to ensure LCpl Rother was picked up, it is every Marine's duty to look out for one another. When he did not see LCpl Rother on the vehicle, he should have demanded assurance he was picked up either in the moment or at the conclusion of the movement.

MARINE LEFT IN DESERT - FATALITY (ROTHER MISHAP)

LCpl Barrett followed the convoy and stopped at BLT checkpoint 2, which was also artillery checkpoint 2, where 1stLt Lawson decided not to post Marines. The artillery road guides posted there climbed into the truck, but upon learning it was not from their convoy, they climbed down. The first two artillery road guides that had been erroneously collected also climbed down. In the trailing Humvee, SSgt Dozier noted these Marines getting off. LCpl Barrett then continued following the convoy.

At checkpoint 3 they collected the Bravo company Marines, who later reported the high speed of the pick-up vehicle and their impression LCpl Barrett was concerned about losing sight of the vehicle in front of him. One of them was physically dragged onto the vehicle as it was moving.

Adding further disorganization, LCpl Barrett's recovery vehicle did not stop to pick up the India Company road guides at checkpoint 4. The report does not explain why they were overlooked. When the rear element of the convoy reached the assembly area, 1stLt Lawson went to SSgt Dozier to ask how many road guides were picked up. Their interaction seemed to amplify the confusion of who had been picked up. According to the report, SSgt Dozier stated six road guides were picked up (he likely was including the artillery Marines). Lawson asked if two were road guides who were left down the road, to which SSgt Dozier said yes (it is uncertain if he meant the artillery Marines that dismounted or the India Marines who were never picked up). Lawson then tried to clarify if only four Marines had been picked up, since he posted six road guides, to which SSgt Dozier said "right." It seems clear the two did not understand each other. 1stLt Lawson must have realized this, because after the battalion was posted, he returned to checkpoint 4 with a vehicle and picked up the India Marines and returned them to their company the next morning.

Key Decision Point: This conversation was another crucial moment in which this mishap could have been avoided. The clear confusion about road guide pick up should have prompted 1stLt Lawson to report the issue to battalion leadership, who could have mandated a unit-wide accountability check.

Accountability

The BLT completed its road march at approximately 0230 on 31 Aug and conducted actions to prepare for the defense evolution in the morning. Once the entire convoy was staged in the assembly area, LCpl Barrett parked his vehicle and went to sleep, not believing it was his responsibility to get the road guides back to their units. He and LCpl Kimble assumed the road guides dismounted and returned to their unit, not realizing the two Bravo Company Marines and LCpl Key remained and slept in the bed of the truck.

Shortly after dawn, a Bravo company leader sought out the logistics train to find their Marines from the road guide and quartering party detail. He found LCpl Barrett's vehicle and collected his two Marines. LCpl Barrett woke after this and realized LCpl Key was still in the back of his truck. LCpl Key asked if LCpl Rother had been picked up, but was informed he was the only one in the area. With neither LCpl Barrett nor LCpl Key having any instructions for returning Key to Kilo Company, LCpl Key stayed in the truck for the remainder of the exercise.

Early the same morning 1stLt Lawson clearly still had a suspicion something may be wrong,

Key Decision Point: Lawson's engagement with the battalion XO was another opportunity to prevent the mishap. Upon hearing there was concern of a missing Marine, the XO should have initiated a unit-wide accountability check immediately.

because he approached the BLT XO, Maj Holm, to inquire if any company reported missing Marines. The XO replied no one had given him reason to believe a road guide had not been picked up. Regardless, three heavy-machine-gun vehicles were sent to retrace the convoy route as far as checkpoint 1. They stopped at the intersection and had Marines in the turret check the area, but no one observed a Marine at the position. LCpl Rother's post would have been 400 meters further down the intersecting road.

MARINE LEFT IN DESERT - FATALITY (ROTHER MISHAP)

At the end of the exercise at approximately 1200, elements of the BLT began returning to Camp Wilson. While LCpl Barrett's vehicle was in an assembly area, the BLT XO observed LCpl Key and asked what he was doing. LCpl Key stated he was a road guide and nobody told him what to do. Maj Holm told him to board an assault amphibious vehicle (AAV) to return to Camp Wilson and rejoin his platoon. Key arrived before the rest of his company and waited in his platoon's berthing area until his platoon commander and platoon sergeant arrived at approximately 1600.

While LCpl Key was en route to Camp Wilson, the majority of Kilo company was preparing for a helicopter lift back to Camp Wilson. At approximately 1200, while they were organizing their heli-teams, 2ndLt Johnson, LCpl Rother's platoon commander, asked Sgt Clyde, his platoon sergeant, where LCpl Rother was. Sgt Clyde stated he was still with the road guide detail. This did not unsettle 2ndLt Johnson, because LCpl Key from the adjacent platoon had not returned either.

Key Decision Point: There may have been a lack of guidance on the return plan for the road guide detail, but not knowing exactly where a Marine was or when he would return should have prompted these Marines to find out the information.

The company's helo-lift began at 1300 with the majority of the company being dropped off by 1630. A portion of the company remained behind with the Company Gunnery Sergeant to count and secure unexpended ammunition. The bulk of Kilo Company, upon arriving at Camp Wilson, turned to cleaning weapons and gear. Another element of the company was at a different ad-hoc range continuing training and firing extra ammunition.



At 1700 another element of the company was tasked to provide an ammo working party. The company did not rejoin fully intact at Camp Wilson until about 1900. The company did not conduct a formal muster during this period since they were fragmented across these different areas. Instead, platoon sergeants verified accountability informally with squad leaders.

For LCpl Rother's squad, this verification took place between 1700 and 1800. His fire-team leader, LCpl Paulate, reported to the squad leader, Sgt Turnell, the presence of three of the four fire-team members. It is uncertain if or how the squad leader reported numbers to the platoon sergeant. What further complicated accountability was Sgt Turnell's departure from the base that evening to visit family members in the area. He did not return until the next evening. The platoon sergeant was aware of Turnell's departure and placed another fire-team leader, Cpl Harbinson, as the acting squad leader in Sgt Turnell's absence. The platoon commander and other company leadership did not know of his departure and no special liberty request was provided.

At 1800 2ndLt Johnson asked Sgt Clyde the status of the personnel, to which he replied the squad leaders reported everyone was accounted for. At 2000 the company gunnery sergeant, SSgt Eisenback, received a "thumbs up" from all platoon sergeants regarding personnel accountability.

At 1900 the armory was opened for weapons turn in. The armory was considered in a "thumbs up" status if all weapons were accounted for by a weapon physically present in the armory or by the possession of a custody receipt card of a checked out weapon. With this criteria, the company armory reported to the company gunnery sergeant at 2030 that the armory "was up," since he had a card for LCpl Rother's weapon.

MARINE LEFT IN DESERT - FATALITY (ROTHER MISHAP)

At 2030 on 31 Aug – approximately 24 hours after LCpl Rother was dropped off – the Kilo company commander, Capt Henderson, returned from a battalion meeting in which the BLT CO stressed that he wanted strict accountability of personnel, weapons, and classified material before anyone went to bed. The company commander looked for the rest of the company leadership to hold a meeting. The rifle platoon commanders were celebrating at the beer garden, so the meeting was held with just the company CO, XO, First Sergeant, Gunnery Sergeant, and weapons platoon commander. Capt Henderson related the BLT CO's words on accountability and stated he assumed the platoons were accounted for, since the platoon commanders were out. The company First Sergeant confirmed personnel accountability and the Gunnery Sergeant confirmed the armory was "up." The company commander and rest of the company secured at 2230 under the impression accountability criteria had been met. Their impression was wrong.



The next morning on 1 Sep, the Kilo Company officers departed to the main base for CAX debriefs. At the same time, the company Gunnery Sergeant and First Sergeant held a formal formation and received an "All Present" report from the platoon sergeants – despite the fact both LCpl Rother and his squad leader were not actually present. The company was then broken into three working parties to conduct a range sweep, vehicle wash-downs, and ammunition loading. There were no noon-time or afternoon formations because of these ongoing working parties.

At approximately 1730, Cpl Harbison, the acting squad leader, realized he had not seen LCpl Rother all day and asked the platoon sergeant, Sgt Clyde where he was. It was at this point Sgt Clyde approached the Kilo Company Gunnery Sergeant, SSgt Eisenback, with "a problem." He reported he thought LCpl Rother was assigned to the range sweep detail, but had not been seen all day. SSgt Eisenback asked who his squad leader was and was the first person above the platoon sergeant to learn that LCpl Rother's squad leader had left the base the night before and had not yet returned.

SSgt Eisenback and Sgt Clyde then briefed the company First Sergeant together, who then briefed the company commander. Capt Henderson gathered facts for five minutes and asked the platoon commander, 2ndLt Johnson, if he knew where LCpl Rother was. This was the first moment 2ndLt Johnson was made aware of LCpl Rother's absence. The company commander then sought out the BLT commander to inform him of the issue. The BLT commander immediately reported LCpl Rother's unaccounted-for status to the Regimental Landing Team (RLT) commander who assumed responsibility for the search efforts.

It was not until this moment, almost 48 hours since LCpl Rother was supposed to have been picked up at his road guide position, almost 24 hours since the rest of his company had returned to Camp Wilson and taken accountability, and almost 12 hours since a formal company formation was held and his platoon was reported "All Present," that the search effort for LCpl Rother began.

Search and Rescue (SAR) Efforts

Within an hour of LCpl Rother's status being reported to the RLT commander, vehicles and aircraft from adjacent units began to sweep the previously known location of the BLT. This initial search discovered a stone arrow pointing generally east, and thermal devices were used to scan the area, but there was no other sign of LCpl Rother. Over the next few days, more aircraft and search parties were added to the effort, and the search area was continually broadened to no avail.

MARINE LEFT IN DESERT - FATALITY (ROTHER MISHAP)

While the field search was beginning on the evening of 1 Sep, the unit called the base provost marshal's office and local civilian law enforcement requesting assistance. The next day, they sought support from civilian agencies with search dogs. This had to be requested through the California Office of Emergency Services (OES), who offered to make available other state search and rescue resources, but the watch officer making this coordination indicated they were only requesting the search-dog assistance. In the late evening of 2 Sep, the dog teams arrived along with a search and rescue expert. They began search efforts at approximately 0345 on 3 Sep.

The morning of 3 Sep, a desert survival advisor from the National Park Service provided a survivability estimate, based on the 107-degree average temperature, that if LCpl Rother was fully rested and hydrated at the time he was posted, he would not survive beyond the evening of 3 Sep. When provided more accurate information of LCpl Rother's physical condition at the time of his posting, this estimate was recalculated and showed LCpl Rother could have travelled between 9 and 27 miles, depending on when he left his original position, and that he likely would have suffered heat stroke and death between 1600 and 2200 on 31 Aug – a full day before his unit even identified his absence.

The initial search for LCpl Rother continued until 1300 on 4 Sep, at which time the search mode was changed from an active effort to a passive one that would occur during normal training through the conclusion of CAX and the unit's return to their home base.

The active search continued beyond the estimated reasonable survivability timeline for LCpl Rother. This search between 1 and 4 Sep included, but was not limited to: 139.9 flight hours in helicopter and fixed wing aircraft, approximately 1758 persons from the ground combat element and combat service support detachment, professional assistance from four park rangers from Joshua Tree National Monument, and seven dog teams from the California Rescue Dog Association. This effort was unsuccessful in locating LCpl Rother.

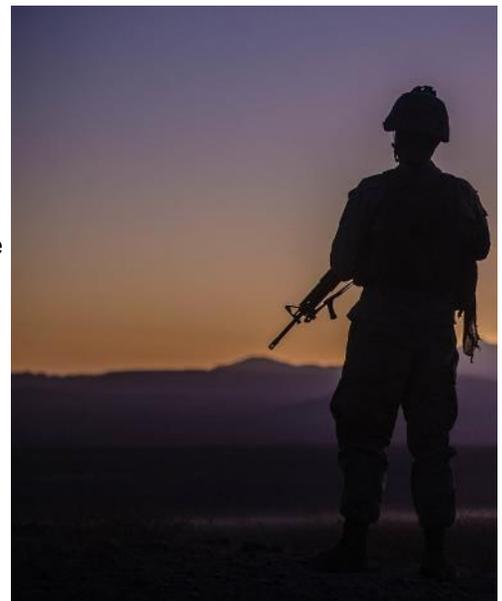
It was not until two extensive follow-on searches were conducted in subsequent months that the skeletal remains of LCpl Rother were found 17 miles from his last known position.

Rother's Final Days

The following is a summary of the probable events of LCpl Rother's demise, based on the nature of his belongings and surroundings, as determined by the SAR experts who located his body. We cannot know at what point LCpl Rother decided his unit wasn't coming back for him or when he started walking to find help, but we know he backtracked to his unit's last known position and left a stone arrow indicating his intended movement. As identified by the investigating officer, this was "*the behavior of a Marine intent on being found.*"

LCpl Rother then made it 17 miles in an average of 107-degree temperatures before trying to make a sun shelter to get out of the heat. He appeared to have tried to build this shelter by spreading his poncho liner over a creosote bush, but it is believed this attempt may have had an opposite effect and actually created an "oven" that accelerated his dehydration.

After a period of time, he exited his shelter in a likely state of delirium and, in classic heat-stroke behavior, shed his clothes and traveled roughly 100 meters before losing consciousness and expiring from dehydration.



Key Takeaways

We're sometimes inclined to point at a single person or action as the cause of a mishap, but General Al Gray's reflection on this incident encourages a more comprehensive approach.

"When a Marine is killed or injured while training, more than the immediate environment of the occurrence must be examined: The quality of leadership at every echelon of the organization, its overall level of training, the degree of supervision of those directly involved, and organizational SOPs are among the matters which must be closely and carefully investigated."

With this guidance in mind, we encourage the following actions and considerations in hopes of preventing another avoidable tragedy like this one.

- 1. Personnel accountability comes first.** There were egregious oversights and violations in this event, but there were also simple mistakes that present-day leaders can easily repeat. It is easy to get too focused in an operation or distracted by friction, but we must make the effort to deliberately plan for accurate accountability and take tactical pauses to self-evaluate how well we are executing the plan.
- 2. Ensure risk management is included in the operational planning process.** As witnessed in the initial FragO meeting, leaders were focused on the operational aspects of the mission, and none took time to consider hazards and risks. Incorporating risk management would have enabled them to identify the lack of personnel-accountability planning and other issues.
- 3. Is it your risk to accept?** A number of times in this incident, individuals accepted risk that was above their paygrade to accept. One of the key tenets of risk management is to "accept risk at the right level." Change is the mother of all risks. When you see a risk – particularly when plans are changing and there is evident confusion – raise it to the right level for decision or mitigation.
- 4. Have an effective lost-Marine plan.** This applies both to the guidance we give our Marines and the response taken by a command when a Marine is lost. In our safety briefs we must explain the exact actions a Marine is to take if they are separated from the unit. Do they stay in last their known position? Do they move to the nearest road or land mark? Given the vast nature of the desert, LCpl Rother stood almost no chance of making it to safety on his own. Had he remained in place, his chances of being located were much higher. We must consider the best course of action for a lost Marine specific to the environment they are training in, and ensure every Marine understands the plan.

At the command level, the Marine Corps was commended by SAR experts for the amount of manpower and resources put into finding LCpl Rother, but also criticized for the "lack of a Search and Rescue PREPLAN...and general ignorance of professional search and rescue techniques" and delaying and under-using civilian professionals. A unit should NOT be trying to figure out a search plan after a Marine is lost. Have a plan in place at the start, tailored for the environment and resources.

- 5. Leaders: Never let your rank outweigh wisdom.** The 1stLt's dismissal of the accurate protests by his junior Marines was a link that could have broken the chain of events to this mishap. We have a responsibility to respect the inputs from our subordinates, especially when it comes to safety.
- 6. Every Marine is a Safety Officer.** Like the principles of crew resource management, every Marine has the responsibility and power to take action. When something isn't right – especially when lives are endangered – say something. While it was not LCpl Key's duty to ensure LCpl Rother was picked up, it is every Marine's duty to look out for one another. When LCpl Key or others did not see Rother after they were collected, they should have demanded assurance he was picked up.

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Key Takeaways (continued)

7. Effective communication means both sides understand the same thing. Effective comms includes backing up, supportive feedback, and acknowledgement that personnel correctly understand. The conversation between 1stLt Lawson and the Motor-T chief at the end of the convoy movement was a clear breakdown in comms in which neither understood each other, and yet neither took action to clarify or report the issue to battalion leadership.

8. Take desert survival classes seriously. Given that his absence went unnoticed for almost 48 hours, LCpl Rother's chances of being found alive were low from the start. But, had he heeded the desert survival training he received before CAX, he may have improved his odds slightly. Given the vast nature of the desert, there was almost no chance of successfully walking to safety. According to the "survival rules" briefed in his training, walking 3.5 miles in 110 degree heat sacrifices a half-day of survival time. Regardless of when he began moving, given the distance he walked, LCpl Rother sacrificed a significant amount of hydration, shortening his survival time. Leaders, ensure your Marines understand their survival training and they take it seriously.

LCpl Rother's exact actions and final thoughts can only be speculated, but what we know about his final days is that while his platoon and company returned to Camp Wilson, LCpl Rother was alone in the desert. While his fellow Marines cleaned gear and "took accountability," he was alone in the desert. While his platoon sergeant visited family and his platoon commanders celebrated the end of CAX, he was alone in the desert. While his company leadership was being debriefed on their actions during CAX, LCpl Rother had likely given up on anyone coming back for him and desperately began a 17-mile trek to try to find help before he died, alone in the desert.

The Sheriff's Department Deputy-Chief who led the team that finally found LCpl Rother's remains said, "we always advise that anyone in the desert or mountains stay put. But once he decided to move, he moved with direction and purpose." He made it to less than a mile from old Highway 66 near a community. *"He made a heroic effort, and he almost succeeded...He had to see the highway. You can't miss it."* It was simply too far to make it. Do not let the lessons from his death go unlearned.



LCpl Jason Rother

Remember ... "Let's be careful out there."