

A Sudden Urge, a Sudden Death

By Capt. Joe Cleary

A combined anti-armor team had just finished a combined-arms exercise over several long and exhaustive, 100-plus-degree days. The scorching heat had taken its toll on the troops, and they were eager to get back to camp for hot chow, a shower, and relaxation. After several days of “fire and maneuver,” the only thing left to do was to kick back and relax in the HMMWV as the driver drove them back. But that’s when their day turned for the worse. Here is what happened:

Two of the team’s HMMWVs, both M1045 variants¹, left the range and drove along the dirt road they had come in on. Traveling at 35 mph, the team was overtaken by a column of LAVs. Once the LAVs passed, one of the HMMWV drivers, who was a

corporal, accelerated rapidly and had a sudden urge to make the vehicle fishtail. When he jerked the wheel to the left, the rear wheels slid, and the HMMWV rolled multiple times, finally stopping on its roof. The four Marines crawled out, but a PFC, riding in the weapons station, was pinned under the vehicle. A corpsman from the lead vehicle quickly arrived and began first aid. Thirty minutes later, a helicopter took the PFC to a naval hospital where he died from head injuries and a severed spinal cord.

When a mishap occurs, there is often a chain of events leading to it, but not in this case. The cause of this mishap can be traced to one Marine’s decision. He didn’t realize the potential consequences of “fishtailing” his HMMWV. As a result, another Marine paid the ultimate price for the driver’s reckless decision. ☛

¹HMMWV variant configured for mounting weapons atop the vehicle e.g. .50 cal, Mk-19, or TOW missile. A Marine, manning the weapons station, sits on a hanging strap and has his upper body exposed above the vehicle’s roof.

Marines
depend on
their driver’s
to get them
home alive.

Photograph by PFC Andrew A. Thornton

Since 1994, Marines have rolled 49 HMMWVs, killing six Marines. Two Marines were discharged with permanent injuries. Total vehicle damages have amounted to \$812,408. Rollovers often occur when Marines take dirt-road curves too fast. Driving fast doesn’t just include speeds of 40 to 50 mph but any speed that greatly reduces your ability to control your vehicle. Even 20 to 30 mph can be dangerous, depending on the conditions. Speeding often results when drivers become lax and don’t pay attention to their speed or changing terrain and weather. At times, HMMWV drivers deliberately speed, and in some cases, they are simply reckless. Reckless driving isn’t a common factor in HMMWV rollovers, but when it does happen, the events can be catastrophic as chronicled in this story. ☛