

End-Ex

By Jon Natividad

Have you ever been in the field during a CAX when the MAGTF commander gave the order over the radio to “End-Ex”? If so, did you remember the excitement of the Marines?

After a long and arduous stretch in the field, Marines can find themselves exhausted. When they hear the words “End-Ex,” Marines suddenly become re-energized about getting back to the barracks as fast as possible for a hot shower, decent chow, and, most importantly, rack time.



! Woo-Hoo!

In this case, a crew of Marines wasn't participating in a CAX. But they were providing security for a weapons-offload at a pier, and they faced similar conditions: exhaustion, enthusiasm for liberty, and a fast armored vehicle (Dragoon). It was a volatile combination and no time to let down their guard. Who would have thought that driving home could have been more dangerous than the security duties they had just completed?

While on duty, this crew of three Marines had received the call to secure and return to the company

area. They were relieved to get the order to call it a day since the previous two days of duty had exhausted them. They had been working 20-hour days from 0200 to 2200, but on this day, they got a break and were securing at 1500. All that remained was to drive 10 miles back to the company area to turn in the Dragoon and their weapons.

Without delay, they got on the road. They took the alternate route because the primary road still was blocked by the weapons off-load. They stopped to talk



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to fellow Marines who were providing security along the road. The off-going crew was excited about being secured early, and they talked about how they were going to catch up on their sleep.

Several minutes later, they were back on the road for their routine drive to the company area. The driver quickly accelerated to more than 50 mph and turned the routine drive into a high-speed run. Farther down the road, they entered an s-curve, where the Dragoon fishtailed. The driver tried to compensate, but his strength and reflexes were no match for the Dragoon's high center of gravity and high speed.

The vehicle flipped five or six times, according to a Marine sentry who witnessed the mishap. All the Marines were ejected because they weren't wearing seatbelts. Marines near the crash site arrived quickly on the scene. Emergency personnel showed up several minutes later, but it was too late. Two of the victims died on the scene in their fellow Marines' arms. Two hours later, the third Marine died at a hospital.

The Marine sentry who witnessed the incident told investigators that the Dragoon went by his post faster than normal. The speed limit for the road was 45 mph, but the unit SOP limited their speed to 35. Later that day, state police reconstructed the mishap and estimated the Dragoon's speed at 54 mph when it approached the curve.

According to the manufacturer's operator manual, "The vehicle's high performance should be carefully controlled when driven on the road." Most of the Marines in the company were aware that the Dragoon wasn't stable at higher speeds. That fact obviously slipped the minds of these young Marines who were tired and knew liberty was in sight.

Why did the driver feel the need to go 19 miles over the speed limit? Was the lure of liberty that strong? Could a lack of sleep have impaired his judgment? The Marines had had ten hours sleep, at

most, in the last three days. Their short four-hour period between shifts had to include their walk from the company area to the barracks and back, preparation for the next day's work, and rest. In one instance, one of the Marines went into town to pick up dinner. With all those things to do, how much sleep could they have gotten? Without the needed rest, the fatigue added up to a dangerous level, where their judgment and reaction time had diminished.

Investigators also found several other problems in the unit:

- There was no way of knowing whether the driver was licensed to drive the Dragoon because his unit kept no records. Overall, the driver-training program was inadequate. The instruction couldn't thoroughly train a Marine to operate a 13-ton, armored-personnel carrier in two days.

- The licensing officer and NCO were not certified or authorized to issue licenses.

- The unit did not have a traffic-safety program¹, and they didn't include operational risk management² in their training and operations. 🍷

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¹ Traffic Safety Program (Drivesafe) MCO 5100.19D

² Operational Risk Management MCO 3500.27



Debris from the Dragoon litters the road.