

# Speed Limits Aren't Just Suggestions

*By Derek Nelson*

**T**he V-150 armored vehicle, also known as a “commando armored personnel carrier,” can bulldoze barricades, trees and stumps. It can climb 36-inch-high obstacles and 60-degree grades. It can plow through deep mud, snow, water, and ditches. Yet, you can tip it over while making a U-turn on a flat, dry road. All you have to do is exceed the speed limit by 10 mph and turn sharply.

Then, assuming nobody is wearing seatbelts, and two of the people are standing or sitting where they really

don't have to be, all hell will break loose. And four-wheel drive and armor plating and extra gas tanks aren't going to help anyone survive.

This chain of events killed two Marines who were part of a five-man team in a Security Forces Company. They had been riding in a V-150 to the location where



they changed crews when their shift was over. The driver sped into a U-turn at 26 mph- 11 mph above the normal speed limit for patrols, much less for making U-turns. It is fast enough to overturn a HMMWV, which is comparatively more stable. A lance

corporal in the nearest security tower said he heard the tires “whine.” After skidding at least 50 feet, the V-150 toppled over on a driveway apron in front of a bunker.

The team leader had been sitting on top of the right front seat’s folding backrest, with his head and upper body out of the front hatch and his feet on the bottom of the seat. The machine gunner had been standing up, facing the rear, with his head and upper body through a top center ring mount. Both were pinned under the 10-ton vehicle. Rescuers raced to the scene of the mishap and extracted the gunner first. He had no pulse and wasn’t breathing, so they started CPR. It took nearly 10 minutes to jack up the V-150, brace it, and extract the team leader. Like the gunner, he had no vital signs.

The driver and the other two Marines escaped with minor injuries.

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Although there were problems with how the unit trained, licensed and supervised vehicle operators, no one could plead ignorance. In initial company training, one of the study packets addressed vehicle safety. It said, in part, that the speed

limits were 5 mph in bad weather, 15 mph for normal patrols, and 25 mph for drills and incidents. It also mandated keeping on the headlights and wearing seatbelts. There had been an SOP that contained detailed guidance about the V-150, including the fact it didn’t corner very well; however, this SOP no longer was enforced.

The V-150 is powerful and capable, but driving it poses some challenges. As the introduction to the operators course said, “The V150 Commando is probably the heaviest and largest vehicle you will ever operate and have full control of in your entire life. It is absolutely paramount that you understand everything about this vehicle in order to protect your life, as well as the lives of your fellow Marines.”

The mishap showed the tragic difference between understanding a theory and putting it into practice. The

Marine who was driving during the mishap hadn't operated the V-150 for six weeks; he had joked about that fact earlier in the day. And he was inexperienced; he'd had one or two hours behind the wheel during training and had driven on only 10 other assignments. He temporarily had been suspended from driving duties at one point but had had no remedial training afterward.

There was no excuse for not wearing seatbelts, a bad habit that was widespread in the entire unit. Most Marines didn't wear them, and most supervisors didn't enforce the rule, which not only made things worse in terms of vehicle safety but also sent the message that maybe all precautions and safety procedures weren't really mandatory. Some Marines said seatbelts kept them from "rapidly deploying," which is, in fact, true.

During a car wreck, for example, the seatbelt keeps you from rapidly deploying through the windshield. It is hard to imagine how rapidly Marines have to deploy during a routine patrol. Furthermore, it couldn't take more than a few seconds to release a seatbelt. Nevertheless, even after the wreck, observers saw widespread noncompliance with seatbelt rules and little enforcement at the local unit.

The question also arose as to whether it was necessary for the gunner to be upright in the hatch during routine patrols in the vehicle. That position may not be necessary, even during a tactical situation, especially in cases when no threat had been identified or located.

One post-mishap recommendation was that the unit write and publish a detailed SOP for motor transport. As we've seen, bits and pieces existed, but they were minimal, particularly in terms of safety and risk management. The lack of an accurate, comprehensive SOP meant that the people who operated, supervised and dispatched vehicles had crucial gaps in their knowledge.

The other obvious bottom line: You can't just put up signs that list a speed limit and that say, "Wear your seatbelt." Leaders and supervisors must enforce the rules, clearly and consistently. Here's a few simple questions. Do vehicles have speedometers that work? Can't someone with sense and supervisory authority glance over, check the speed, and tell a driver to slow down? If not, why not? **GW**

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