DoD: Making Peace with Safety

The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) in 2003 was given the difficult task of dramatically reducing non-combat accidents for military and civilian personnel and their families. Can a culture fashioned for war conquer safety?

By Katherine Torres and Sandy Smith

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When most people think of safe places to work, the U.S. military doesn't come to mind. Even during times of peace, when things are calm injury and fatality rates for its personnel – both civilian and military – are high.

In 2003, former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld ("SecDef" to those in the military) charged the armed forces with reducing preventable accidents by 50 percent, a number that later was increased to 75 percent.

"World-class organizations do not tolerate preventable accidents," Rumsfeld said in a May 19, 2003, memo. "These goals are achievable, and will directly increase our operational readiness. We owe no less to the men and women who defend our nation."

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Lt. Cmdr. Robert Cooper (left) and Assistant Inspector General William Brem Morrison, along with other senior leaders, are helping lead DoD's safety turnaround.

The directive, called the "Mishap Reduction Initiative," applies to all DoD activities and includes on- and off-duty and active-duty military personnel as well as National Guard and Reserve forces and all civilian employees. The reduction goal also applies to all operations of aircraft, weapons, ordnance, motor vehicles, maritime assets and installations.

The initiative is a concerted effort to engage all levels of DoD leadership in mishap prevention strategies, which include developing a real-time mishap decision support system; applying commercial technologies, where practical, on high-risk equipment such as aircraft; and implementing best practices from industry and other government agencies into DoD activities.

Like other military initiatives, this one started at the top and is slowly working its way down through the ranks.

The Survey

The first step in the process, says William Brem Morrison, assistant inspector general for Inspection and Evaluations, was a safety perception survey of four groups in the military. The groups were comprised of more than 2,000 senior leaders such as admirals, generals and Senior Executive Service civilians; active-duty personnel; civilian employees; and National Guard and Reserve personnel.

"We learned that as a group, [the senior leaders] thought highly of themselves and their attention and pursuit of safety in their service," Morrison says. However, he adds: "There was a distinct gap in the perception of senior leaders and their constituents and subordinates, who did not agree with senior leaders about the emphasis on safety."

Now that the survey is complete – results are expected to be published this month beginning with a series of nine reports – DoD will examine:

- Policy – Are the right policies and programs in place?
- Resourcing – How are military leaders managing resources?

☛Organization – Is the organization correctly set up to promote safety and safe behaviors?

☛Lessons learned.

In private industry, at a single facility, these questions sometimes are hard to answer and analyze. This initiative – which examines on- and off-the-job safety for military and civilian personnel and their families, as well as for National Guard and Reserve personnel, at 6,000 facilities scattered around the world – would seem to be an impossible task.

Culture Change Happens Slowly

Morrison is well-aware that culture change for the military happens slowly. Layers of command and a legendary bureaucracy do not make his job easy.

As an example of the challenge ahead, Morrison points out, "There is very limited visibility of safety in the DoD budget. It is hard to determine how much money is spent on safety because it's all part of the operational and maintenance costs."

Morrison says he hopes that DoD will focus more on funding prevention versus the greater costs of consequence management, and that leadership will "adopt, revise, change and create policies" to improve safety.

Another challenge, says Lt. Cmdr. Robert Cooper, team leader of the Evaluation of the Department of Defense Safety Program, is data collection and the accuracy of existing data regarding injuries and illnesses.

The latest Department of Defense statistics made available to OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS are for FY 2002. They indicate that there were 1.25 million injuries to DoD personnel – civilian and military. Cooper thinks the numbers may be under-reported, and increasing the accuracy and timeliness in reporting is one of the challenges the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) faces when assessing the safety climate of the department. However, he claims that the Department of Defense has made progress in "what we report and how we report."

The Benefits of Using Leading Indicators

As OIG strives to make improvements to meet Rumsfeld's injury reduction goal by 2008, the emphasis is on getting DoD leadership to shift its focus from lagging indicators such as injury statistics to leading indicators such as near-miss data, process measures and safety climate surveys.

"In our evaluations and our observations, we want to be part of a process that prevents a train wreck from occurring, rather than to capture the results of that train wreck," Morrison says. "By incorporating more risk management and prevention mechanisms and tools, that train wreck [injuries and accidents] can be prevented."

Although the survey results are not yet published, OIG is not holding back when it comes to sharing its findings, using a technique the agency calls "constructive engagement." Various stakeholders, including the occupational safety community, DoD leadership and others, are being given access to information from the surveys, along with observations and suggestions to facilitate further improvement in the safety culture. Morrison states that the "constructive engagement" process is unique to the department.

"This is a very different approach to what [traditional safety and military] investigators and auditors have done as they tend to keep their observations, conclusions and recommendations close to

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their chest until the report is published," Morrison says. "In our case, we are looking at it as a team effort."

Team Leader

Last year, OIG suggested to the Defense Safety Oversight Council (DSOC) that SecDef provide a vision of safety transformation. Two months later, Rumsfeld released a memo titled "Reducing Preventable Accidents." The memorandum was sent to the secretaries of the military departments, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, commanders of the combatant commands and service chiefs. The memo outlined Rumsfeld's vision for safety transformation.

While acknowledging that some DoD divisions were progressing toward their mishap reduction goals, Rumsfeld insisted, "We must rededicate ourselves to these goals – and achieve them.

"Too often, we excuse mishaps by citing the difficult circumstances in which we operate," Rumsfeld said. "We have trained our men and women to operate in very trying conditions. There is no excuse for losing lives given proper planning, attention to detail and the active involvement of the chain of command."

Accountability figured largely in the memo, with SecDef claiming it "is essential to effective leadership."

One of the strategies OIG has come up with to institute accountability from SecDef down to the supervisory ranks is to conduct interviews and Web-page surveys to learn "to what extent the senior leadership hold themselves accountable for safety and for the safety of their subordinates," Morrison explains.

"I want to hear what you are doing to improve your safety performance and I want to see the results of your actions," Rumsfeld told his senior staff members. He also noted that changing training, improving material acquisitions and altering business practices were all possibilities, if it meant saving lives.

Kenneth Krieg, the Pentagon's acquisition's chief, sent a policy memorandum on Jan. 17 to DoD's senior management alerting them that the acquisition and technology programs task force would require safety risk assessment for each weapon acquired by the department. According to Morrison, this was an example of how Krieg is taking the recommendations made by OIG and supported by SecDef and is transforming his department's policies to reflect a new emphasis on safety.

"This policy memorandum [from Krieg] is a milestone that demonstrates how the defense department's leadership is taking the reins in covering safety," Morrison says.

Measuring Progress

The last recommendation by OIG is to measure the progress that is being made. The essence of this recommendation, Morrison says, is to periodically revisit the the National Safety Council's Safety Perception Survey, especially since the first one captures a baseline of how the Defense Department as a whole feels about safety. OIG proposes to conduct the survey on a biannual basis, and Morrison says the agency should be starting the next round of surveys this spring.

The 2007 surveys will have the same questions and framework. Their responses will show how far safety perceptions – and the safety culture – have come, Morrison explains.

"The next safety survey will help us measure empirically the change of the safety culture at the department ... hopefully for the better," Morrison says. OH

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