

Rethinking the Recovery

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CAPT. JEREMY PHILLIPS

Abu Company, 1-187 Infantry Battalion

Fort Campbell, Kentucky

My battalion was the last maneuver element to execute the brigade fire-control exercise. Our cavalry squadron and two infantry battalions executed the lane for several days in severe weather with no safety issues. We were lucky to have beautiful weather now, but the lane was a little soggy in places. Two companies at a time maneuvered one heavy weapons section each in an up-armored High-Mobility Multi-Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV) and two rifle platoons through the breach of a wire obstacle.

During my company's blank fire iteration, the direct fire, simultaneous explosive breach and indirect fire all went according to plan. About 100 meters from the objective, though, one of our gun trucks got stuck in some pretty deep mud. Although we were able to complete the lane, we had to recover the vehicle before the next two companies could start the first live iteration of the day. It was at that point we encountered a significant unexpected risk.

The weapons section's plan to self-recover the vehicle with the other gun truck and tow strap they brought along was the obvious first option, but it was

immediately apparent that wouldn't work. Looking around the objective, the only other vehicle nearby was my battalion commander's Mine Resistant Ambush Protected All-Terrain Vehicle (M-ATV). We figured that should do the trick. After all, it's got "all-terrain" in the name — plus, it's heavier.

The M-ATV certainly is heavier, weighing about 15 tons, compared to about 5 tons for an M1151 HMMWV. Those of you who've had recovery operations go bad will immediately see our mistake: the much heavier M-ATV sank in the mud and got stuck just as badly as the first vehicle. "Well," we thought, "at least there is a wrecker on the lane."

When the wrecker arrived with the trained H8 recovery operations NCO at the helm, we thought he would make short work of the situation. Instead, he proceeded to back up to the M-ATV and get the wrecker stuck too! So now we had three progressively heavier vehicles stuck with no other recovery assets on the range. To make matters worse, daylight was slipping away for the live iterations.

After some quick thinking, we came up with another plan, but it was a long shot. We figured we might be able to pay out the winch on the wrecker to a Light Medium Tactical Vehicle (LMTV) on a nearby road and pull it out. However, as the driver let out the winch, it became apparent it had significant fraying. It seemed like the cable might not last long under pressure, but we were determined to try anyway. Of course, the cable snapped almost instantly.

The wrecker had a locker full of chains, so we hooked them to the LMTV and tried again. The H8 NCO, who was driving the LMTV, tried to pull the wrecker by driving quickly to the end of the chain and jerking the stuck vehicle. After a few attempts, the stuck vehicle was clearly moving a little bit, but I stopped the driver and told him I didn't think this would work. He assured me it was working, so I backed away. On the very next attempt, the chain snapped right next to the pintle and launched back toward the cab of the wrecker.

Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 4-31, Recovery and Battle Damaged Assessment and Repair, defines the sudden strain on a cable or chain as "acceleration impact" and the technique of snapping a cable to tension as "shock loading." The ATP specifically warns against using this method or allowing it to happen by accident. Luckily, nobody was hurt by 30 feet of chain flying back at the vehicle, which is known as backlash. As a matter of fact, the vehicle wasn't even scratched. However, now we knew we were really stuck, so we stopped our futile attempts while another wrecker was summoned.

In hindsight, our mistakes during this operation were comparable to other failed recovery attempts I've assisted with or witnessed. The focus was on recovering the vehicle as quickly as possible without desyncing the brigade operation. It is the responsibility of the unit commander, officer in charge or senior personnel onsite to pause, plan and conduct risk management. I was uncomfortable with the wrecker driver's actions, and as an officer, I should have stopped him immediately. However, I let my concern for the timely execution of the range override my gut feeling.

Many times, the most thorough training or operational plan will only mention recovery operations in passing on the CONOP slide. Leaders should remember that DD Form 2977, Deliberate Risk Assessment Worksheet, has a risk assessment review section at the end for changing conditions or plans. It is meant to encourage the systematic review of residual risk levels. In this case, the officers and senior NCOs present should have paused, evaluated the conditions and available resources, and made some better decisions about the asset and method of recovery. This is common-sense stuff, although all of it is covered in detail in ATP 4-31.

If you are ever executing similar missions, or encounter unexpected circumstances on a range or mission, take the time to plan and mitigate risk. A little patience and forethought will go a long way. Using established recovery tactics, techniques and procedures or approved recovery steps is essential. It may not always be practical, but for inexperienced leaders, consulting the ATP or unit standing operating procedure (SOP) can allay concerns about proper use of equipment. In the absence of a hardcopy SOP on the scene, discuss the plan and recovery methods with the Soldiers and NCOs that will execute it to make sure only appropriate techniques are used and everyone understands the plan. Readiness Through Safety!