

# Unaware is not an Excuse

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## I HAD TO GIVE A EULOGY

**Y**ou may think you are doing all the right things concerning the health and welfare of your energetic young airmen, but do you really know what is happening during their prized and well-deserved days off? I thought I did.

This Airman had just turned 20 and had been at Dyess just 8 months. She was on her way to becoming a great weapons loader. Her bubbly personality and attitude made her a pleasure to be around and an asset to her section. She confided in me numerous times concerning her personal life and coordinated trips to Houston to see her relatives. Her family lived just over 6 hours from base, so she had ample opportunity to go home, and see her sister and grandmother. I knew when she was going and returning ... or so I thought.

time to make it to roll call. She was never late for work, so it never occurred to me to ask if she had really traveled to Houston as planned over the weekend. Our squadron has a policy for signing out on Verbal Orders of the Commander (VOCO) with supervisor's knowledge. During your normal weekend pass, you can leave the local area for day or weekend trips and not be on leave. You must sign out and have it approved by your supervisor. This really works well knowing where your people are, and when they will return, especially in today's world political climate. We need to know where everyone is and must be able to contact them.

This terrible weekend in November started with great weather, sun shining, and every-

midnight on Monday morning knowing she had to report to work at 7 a.m. Just 35 miles from base on a lonely West Texas country highway, she crossed two oncoming lanes and ran head-on into a pickup truck. The other driver escaped with non-life-threatening injuries. She, however, lost consciousness and expired from her injuries approximately an hour after the accident. The Texas Highway Patrol accident report cited distraction as a possible cause. I believe fatigue played a part.

Knowing this airman was traveling on verbal orders, and having the route and times down on paper, did not help this situation. I was unaware she routinely had done this trip and pulled in just before her shift. Had I been aware of her past practice of pulling in before the shift, I would have spent more time talking to her about her plans. These young Airmen need to know that they are not 10 feet tall and bullet-proof, and sometimes there can be deadly repercussions to their actions. At work, they wear goggles, gloves and aprons, and watch each other for safety and Operational Risk Management even if they are not being watched.

Off duty, they may not think twice about driving excessive lengths without adequate sleep or breaks.

This Airman made the ultimate mistake by not doing what she had said on the VOCO letter. When she didn't leave Houston on Sunday, she should have kept her supervisor apprised of her situation. I know it would have been better for her to call and admit she made a mistake by not leaving home in time to be at work after a full rest period. By not wanting to be charged a couple days leave or be counseled on her responsibility, she made a decision that cost this bright Airman her life.

Had I been aware, I could have taken further steps to prevent this tragedy. It is too late

for her, but we can use her death to teach others and prevent a recurrence. Unaware is not an excuse. Become aware ... Now!

Supervisors, talk with your subordinates, and know what they are doing and where they are going. You, your unit and, especially, your subordinates will reap great rewards by not letting your people get themselves into trouble and not having to setup a memorial service.

One more reminder — make sure you and your troops have the Emergency Data Card and Servicemember's Group Life Insurance current. It may save your family and others unnecessary grief during an already tragic time. ▶

This terrible weekend in November started with great weather, sun shining, and everyone looking forward to having fun.

During the accident investigation after her untimely death, I learned from one of her friends that she had traveled 6 hours after her swing shift one Friday night. She did not return until Monday morning and traveled back just in

one looking forward to having a little fun. This airman signed out saying she would visit her sister and grandmother, and return on Sunday. She recently moved to day shift, and she did not leave Houston until just after

