WINTER ROAD CONDITIONS IN EUROPE

1. Road conditions during the winter months can change very quickly in Europe, and can be deadly for unsuspecting drivers. Heavy rain, snow, black ice, freezing rain, and fog are responsible for Soldier deaths and injuries on European roads every winter. All drivers must be prepared for possible changes in road conditions to avoid injuring themselves and others. In many cases, simply reducing speed will reduce risks and prevent accidents.

2. USAREUR Regulation 385-55, appendix I, provides inclement weather road condition status policy. Every leader will ensure that Soldiers redeploying to, or deploying from, USAREUR during the winter months are briefed on this policy. Each base support battalion is responsible for determining local road conditions and status. Soldiers must be aware of the hazardous road conditions they can expect while driving in Europe, as well as how to access up-to-date information on road conditions in their areas of operations using the *Winter Safety* section of the USAREUR Safety Web site at *http://www.per.hqusareur.army.mil/services/safetydivision/main.htm*.

3. Below are winter road conditions that Soldiers can expect when driving in Europe. Recommended precautions are also given for each of these conditions to reduce the potential for accidents. All Soldiers should be briefed on these hazardous driving conditions and precautions before being allowed to drive a vehicle in Europe.

a. Ice.

(1) Icy conditions can be expected any time the outside air temperature is 40 degrees Fahrenheit (4 degrees Celsius) or less. Although water freezes at 32 degrees Fahrenheit (0 degrees Celsius), road surfaces can freeze when the air temperature drops to 40 degrees Fahrenheit (4 degrees Celsius). An important place to watch for this condition is on bridges. Bridge surfaces are exposed to the wind and cool off faster than the rest of the road. Freezing rain can glaze road surfaces with ice, causing extremely hazardous driving conditions.

(2) The following terms are often used to describe specific icing conditions that drivers can expect. Some are more easily recognizable than others, but all are dangerous.

● **White Ice.** White ice results when compacted snow melts slightly and then freezes. This ice can usually be seen on the road. When traveling on white ice, drive very slowly. If you cannot find a place to park until conditions improve, install tire chains for better traction.

● **Glare Ice.** Glare ice is a slippery spot that may appear on an otherwise clear road. It is most common in shaded areas where a cold wind can freeze a wet road surface quickly. If you see a patch of ice ahead, brake before reaching it and try not to brake while actually on the ice.

● **Black Ice.** Black ice occurs when condensation, such as dew and fog, freezes on road surfaces when temperatures reach 32 degrees Fahrenheit (0 degrees Celsius) or below. This forms an extra-thin layer of ice on the road that is difficult to see. This shiny ice surface is one of the most slippery road conditions. Black ice fools drivers. Its shine tricks them into thinking it is water on the road. Black ice is likely to form first under bridges and overpasses, in shady spots, and at intersections.

(3) When roads are icy or slushy—

● Drive slowly and allow extra room to slow down and stop. It can take 10 times longer to stop in icy conditions than on a dry road.

● Use the highest gear possible to keep the wheels from spinning.

● Maneuver gently and avoid harsh braking and acceleration.

● To brake without locking the wheels, get into a low gear earlier than normal, allow the speed to fall, and use the brake pedal gently.

● If you skid, ease off the accelerator but do not brake suddenly. Turn the front wheels toward the direction in which the rear wheels are skidding.

b. Snow.

(1) Drivers can expect snow while driving in Europe. Falling snow can reduce driver visibility, especially when it is windy. Snow can accumulate very quickly, especially at higher elevations, and cause slippery driving conditions. Drifting snow can become very deep on roads at all elevations. Snowdrifts can be a very serious hazard to drivers because they can render any vehicle immobile and lead to very large traffic jams. Drivers should be prepared for snow before venturing out on the highways during the winter months.

(2) Proper use of snow chains can make driving in the snow safer. Snow chains can be rented from many gas stations midway through your journey and dropped off at another station down the road. Sometimes membership in one of the European-based automobile clubs is necessary for this service, but not always. The cost is low and is based on the number of kilometers traveled. Stop as soon as you think you may need the snow chains, because supplies are limited at each station. Otherwise, purchase a set of snow chains properly sized for your vehicle and keep them in the vehicle during the winter season. Practice installing them before the snow begins to fall.

(3) The following safety tips should be used when driving in snowy conditions:

● Slow down. Triple the usual distance between your car and the one ahead.

● Stay in the plowed lane; avoid driving over the ridges between the plowed areas. If you must switch lanes, slow down, signal, and move over slowly.

● If you skid, steer into the skid. For example, if the back of your vehicle is skidding to the left, turn the steering wheel to the left.

● Do not pump your brakes and avoid locking them up. If your brakes lock, take your foot off the brake pedal for a moment.

● If you are involved in a fender-bender, move the vehicles out of the lanes of travel.

● Keep a blanket and flashlight in the vehicle.

● While driving, keep your headlights on. Keep snow and ice off your mirrors, windows, and lights.

● As always, wears your seatbelts.

● If your vehicle has an anti-lock braking system (ABS) and you must brake, be sure to press the brake pedal and hold.

c. Fog. Fog is the condensation of moisture in the atmosphere near the surface of the earth. This can happen in several ways, but always results from the same basic conditions: warm, moist air meeting cold air; or cold, moist air meeting warm air. These conditions exhibit themselves throughout the year, but predominately occur during the spring and winter months. Fog can form quickly and may reduce a driver's visibility to zero. Fog is a major hazard on European highways and contributes to many automotive accidents every year. The following safety tips should be used when fog is expected.

● Consider postponing your trip until the fog clears.

● SLOW DOWN before you enter a patch of fog.

● If your vehicle is equipped with foglights, turn them on.

● Be sure that you can stop within the distance that you can see.

● Turn on the windshield wipers and defroster to remove moisture from the windshield.

● Use your low-beam headlights whether it is day or night.

● Do not use high beams; they reflect off the fog and can impede visibility.

● Use the right edge of the road or painted road markings as a guide.

- Watch for slow-moving and parked vehicles.
- Do not change lanes or pass other vehicles unless absolutely necessary.
- If you must pull off the road, signal, then carefully pull off as far as possible.
- After pulling off the road, turn on your four-way flashers.

d. Rain. Winters in Europe tend to be very wet. Long periods of rain can lead to flooding and standing water on roads. Even thin layers of water on the road can be dangerous. Heavy rains can reduce a driver's visibility to dangerously short distances and make roadway markings and other traffic difficult to see. Water mixed with dirt and oil can create slick surfaces. Wet brakes can increase stopping distances. Hydroplaning can occur when the tire's tread cannot move the water from underneath the tire fast enough. The tire begins to ride atop a ridge of water and loses contact with the ground, which can lead to loss of vehicle control. The combination of fast speeds and wet European highways results in many hydroplaning accidents every year. Many variables lead to hydroplaning, but slower speeds and good tires are the best way to prevent it. The following safety tips should be used when driving in wet weather:

- Most importantly, SLOW DOWN.
- Stay in middle lanes, as water tends to collect and create pools in outside lanes.
- Follow vehicles using the 3-second rule of spacing.
- Try to follow in the tracks of the vehicle in front of you.
- Avoid hard braking; take your foot off the accelerator to slow down.
- Ensure that the tires and windshield wipers are serviceable.
- Drive with your headlights on.
- Never drive beyond the limits of visibility.
- Never drive through moving water or puddles that touch the vehicle frame.
- Beware of high winds during storms and blinding lightning at night.

4. Winter road conditions in Europe can be a challenge for all drivers, especially for those who do not have experience driving in Europe. When driving under these challenging conditions, slow down and increase the distance to the vehicle in front of you. Decreasing your speed will allow more time to respond when a difficult situation arises. Factors such as the type of vehicle you are driving, the quality of snow tires your vehicle is equipped with, and your abilities as a driver should all be considered when adjusting your speed. Prepare for unplanned events by carrying a cell phone and having emergency supplies in the vehicle, such as the following:

● Abrasive material (cat litter, salt, sand, or traction mats) to use when the vehicle gets stuck in snow, slush, or mud.

● Booster cables, a compass, and a warning light or road flares.

● Brightly colored cloth to signal for help.

● First-aid kit.

● Flashlight (with extra batteries).

● Scraper with a brush on one end.

● Snow shovel.

● Tow chain or strap.

● Warning device (flares or reflective triangles).

5. For many winter road conditions, the right risk decision is to delay travel and pull off the road until conditions improve. For other conditions, simply reducing speed and increasing the distance between vehicles may be appropriate to reduce risk to an acceptable level. Leaders will ensure that every Soldier knows how to evaluate risks and make the proper decision when road conditions begin to deteriorate.