



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada
Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

...from the
director's chair

Look ahead and be prepared

Pilots have a great expression: it's better to be on the ground wishing you were flying than the other way around. That reminds me of a few other wish-I-haddas: plugged the car in last night, checked the air pressure in my spare tire, filled that windshield washer jug last time I stopped. You get the point. A bad situation can turn worse by lack of planning and foresight, as I learned in spades a few years ago.

I was travelling in a nasty snowstorm, east-bound on the 401 around Brockville. I wanted to get off the highway, but with near-zero visibility, I took the wrong exit and wound up a few miles west of Brockville on a lonely off-ramp that was totally drifted in with snow. My little VW Jetta diesel stopped dead in the deep snow and there I sat.

My immediate concern wasn't food or staying warm, but that I might get creamed by a snow plow or a big truck coming off the exit ramp. So today, my winter emergency kit includes an amber beacon I can place on the roof of the car.

I'm Canadian, eh? So I know all about winter. I also travel a lot, so I have good snow tires, I keep my fuel tank filled, and I've always carried a shovel, jumper cables, first aid kit, and an extra jacket in case of emergencies.

But the Brockville incident showed me how ill-prepared I was, really, for an emergency. I was totally alone, it was pitch black and minus 20, my cell phone was only half-charged (crummy reception anyway), I had no food in the car, and my water bottle was almost empty. And that jacket really wouldn't help much if I was stranded for long.

After a few hopeless howls, I opened the hood to find the entire engine compartment packed solid with snow. It took a freezing, wet hour or

so to clear it out, and luckily, the car started after a couple of tries – I think my air intake was blocked – and I got back on the 401 and made my way to Brockville where I hunkered down in a motel room for the night.

People who know me often chuckle when they see my winter emergency "kit" which takes up a sizable chunk of my vehicle's cargo area. Some might think it's a little over the top – amber beacon included – but I'm not taking any chances.

I'm on the road a lot in winter, with frequent trips in the Montreal-Ottawa-Toronto corridor, and I make regular pilgrimages back home to the Maritimes.

My trusty little wagon has nearly 350,000 kms on it, so I like to hedge my bets on getting to my destination warm and dry. If I ever have a Brockville-turned-worse experience, I like to think I could comfortably hold out for a few days at roadside.

When I started putting my kit together, I figured I could learn a lot from paying attention to how truckers prepare for emergencies. Who better to learn from? With those millions of miles and years of experience under their belts, and the potential for calamity around every turn, there's nothing they're not prepared for, right?

Not quite. While I learned a lot about road safety and preparedness from the pros, I discovered that many others are just as complacent and ill-prepared as I was. Perhaps there's a false sense of security that comes from travelling with a bed on board, and probably more food and water than most four wheelers would have in their cars, but getting stranded at roadside is equally dangerous for any driver who hasn't provisioned their vehicle in advance.



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And it can happen so easily. You can slide off the road in bad weather with little other traffic on the road. Fuel can gel up, leaving you without heat. A road closure coupled with impassable lanes can keep rescue vehicles off the road for days.

All this is especially true on remote sections of highway, but it can happen on busy, well-travelled roads as well. Think I-90 in Buffalo last November or Hwy. 402 near Sarnia a few years ago. Or just last month when an avalanche hazard closed Hwy. 1 near Revelstoke, B.C., leaving hundreds of truck drivers stranded for a couple of days. Some had enough food and water packed to sustain them for a while, but many more didn't.

In addition to the obvious emergency gear I've always carried, what's in my quirky kit? I pack stuff like freeze-dried meals, canned heat, cooking/eating utensils, energy bars, tea bags, water, personal hygiene items, and duct tape; flashlights and batteries, candles, matches, emergency flares, blankets, pillow, sleeping bag, and tons of warm clothes.

I have a signal mirror, beacons, a whistle, orange emergency tape, an assortment of tools, lots of wires and chargers for my gadgets, and a power inverter.

A few old paperback novels and a deck of cards in the kit will help me pass the time waiting for rescue.

There's more, and I'll be very happy if none of it ever gets used. But I'll wager most of you have things on your check list that I've forgotten.

If you have, let me know, and I'll add it. I'm always open to tips from the pros.