PLANNING SERIES · PLN-07

PLN-07 — GOTWA

The Five-Point Contingency Plan

A pre-movement accountability plan, so the people you leave behind know exactly when waiting stops and what to do next.

BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

GOTWA is a five-point brief — Going, Others, Time, What, Actions — given to whoever stays behind before anyone separates from the group. It answers the one question the group cannot answer later: what should the people still here do if the people who left do not come back?

It is not a schedule and not a check-in message. A schedule states what you expect; a check-in says you are fine so far. GOTWA is the only one that still works after the plan fails, because it is the only one addressed to the person who has to act.

WHY THIS MATTERS

The expensive hours are not the ones you spend missing. They are the ones nobody spends looking.

An overdue party leaves behind somebody who can only wait, worry, wait longer, and eventually guess. That interval runs to hours and sometimes to a night, and it is lost for one reason: nobody decided in advance when waiting stops. The brief costs ninety seconds at the door and removes the guessing — for a supply run, a day hike, a road trip, or a group movement.

The National Park Service makes the same point from the other direction: a search is substantially impeded when the trusted contact does not call anyone.

THE FIVE POINTS

G — Going	Where the departing party is headed, stated precisely enough to be searched on — route and destination, not just a direction.
O — Others	Who is going, by name. A headcount tells searchers how many; names tell them who, and who is still at home to ask.
T — Time	Two clocks, not one: when the party expects to return, and the later trigger time at which the people left behind stop waiting and start acting.
W — What	The pre-decided ladder for those left behind — attempt contact, wait, notify, escalate outward — with who calls whom, in what order, and what to tell them.
A — Actions	What each party does if something goes wrong while separated: the party moving, and the party holding. Both sides get briefed, not just the one leaving.

COURSE LESSONS

1	**The Accountability Gap**	Where the failure actually lives — not in the party that left, but in the party that stayed and was never told what to do.
2	**The GOTWA Framework**	The five points, their doctrinal origin, and why a brief nobody repeated back is not a brief.
3	**Going and Others**	Route against destination, intermediate points, named people rather than headcounts, and handling changes made after you leave.
4	**Time**	Expected return against trigger time, turnaround discipline, buffers, and check-in schedules that do not cause false alarms.
5	**What**	Building the escalation ladder: who may start it, what they say, and when the right instruction is to stay put.
6	**Actions**	Actions on contact for both parties, communications failure, injury, and the case nobody plans for — trouble finding those who stayed.
7	**Writing and Delivering the Plan**	Card format, briefing technique, where the written copy lives, and how the plan changes for a child, a solo trip, or a group.
8	**Practicum**	Build and brief a real plan for a real movement on your own ground, then have the receiving party brief it back. Self-scored.

DOCTRINAL SOURCES

TC 3-21.76, Ranger Handbook (Sep 2025)	HQ, Dept. of the Army	Para 7-14 and Table 7-1 — the five points. Primary source.
ATP 3-21.8, Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad (2024)	HQ, Dept. of the Army	Para 7-15 — contingency planning within patrol operations.
MCWP 3-11.3, Scouting and Patrolling	U.S. Marine Corps	Plans issued before a leader's reconnaissance; actions on contact.
Trip Plan; Float Plan	NPS; U.S. Coast Guard	Civilian equivalents — reliable-person model, written rescue trigger.