



Naval Safety Center

LESSONS LEARNED



LL 21-24

ON-DUTY FIREARM NEGLIGENT DISCHARGES

Firearm negligent discharges (NDs) are all too common for our off-duty service members. We've published five Lessons Learned on that topic alone. One might assume off-duty NDs may frequently occur because, in a more relaxed environment (*which too often includes alcohol*), complacency tends to catch up with us.

You might think that on-duty NDs are rare, but not so much. When we're in uniform, we tend to be more professional, and we have our peers around us to keep us on our toes, but complacency still happens. On-duty NDs are less common than off-duty ones, but they happen more than you'd think. In the past ten years, there are more than 100 on-duty NDs recorded in the safety center database (*and those are only the ones that got reported*). We know (*but can't count*) there have been more than that. Here are a handful of the reported examples that serve as good reminders to abide by those weapons safety rules we repeat so often.



- Do as I say, not as I do. During instruction at the Navy's Expeditionary Small Arms Marksmanship Instructor course, an instructor demonstrated how to roll the trigger on an M9. Before conducting any dry-fire, the instructor is supposed to verify the weapon is clear and safe with two students, but the instructor neglected this task. As a result, he negligently fired a round right in front of his class. — *The instructor gave a great demonstration of what NOT to do; a pretty embarrassing moment for an instructor of instructors. Fortunately, no one was hurt. Treat every firearm as if it's loaded.*

- How did you break a tank? After an exercise, a Marine in an M1 Abrams tank was told to clear and put in condition 4 (*empty and safe*) the .50 Cal machine gun in the tank commander hatch. The weapon hadn't been placed on "safe" after firing, though. As the Marine climbed out the hatch, his flak jacket compressed the butterfly trigger, firing a round. The bullet penetrated the bore extractor and ricocheted off the main gun barrel. — *This may be the only known instance of a self-inflicted technical kill of a main battle tank. Please remember to use the safety (on every firearm).*

- A ROCKET ND (yes, really!). During entry-level training, a Marine was staged to fire an M-72 Light Anti-Armor Weapon (LAW) rocket. When it came time for him to take his shot, he excitedly backed down the berm he was behind and prepped his rocket. After arming the weapon, he was told by an instructor to "keep his hand off the trigger" (*per that firearm safety rule that says not to do that with a weapon until you are ready to fire*). The Marine adjusted his hands as he began moving back up the berm in a crouched position. On the way up, he tripped and fumbled the weapon as he was adjusting. As the LAW spiraled to the ground, both he and the instructor tried to grab it, and in the chaos, one of their fingers grasped the trigger, unintentionally firing the weapon. Fortunately, the explosive was launched upward and downrange, but the backblast was oriented downward, injuring the Marines' legs and knocking the instructor unconscious for several seconds. — *Let's all say it together: "Keep your finger off the trigger until you are ready to fire." And maybe don't give the rocket to the butterfingers.*

- Why does my gun sound weird? During a "force on force" training event using blanks, a Marine didn't realize he still had a magazine of live ammunition from a previous range session. When the event began, he unwittingly loaded the magazine of live ammo he had mistakenly been able to retain.

Once the two sides got in an engagement, the Marine fired. He blew the blank firing adapter (BFA) off the front of his rifle ... and then kept shooting! He somehow didn't realize what happened, because the report states he fired multiple rounds before an instructor noticed one of the weapons systems "didn't sound right" and called a cease-fire. Mercifully, either the Marine had poor aim or the damage to the barrel reduced his accuracy, and these errant rounds hit nobody. — *It was only by a miracle nobody was injured or killed. This sort of event is the exact reason we have strict brass check procedures when leaving a range, as well as cool down periods between live-fire and blank-fire events. Verify you have the correct ammo.*



● Who gave the Major a loaded weapon? A colloquial joke in the Marine Corps is an enlisted Marine's weapon is his or her rifle, and an officer's weapon is a radio. That saying might be for the best. A Marine officer had concluded his post as the Command Duty Officer (CDO) and was turning over with his relief. While clearing the weapon for turnover, instead of ejecting the magazine on the condition 3 weapon and then pulling the slide back to clear it, he accidentally reversed the order (*which doesn't work well*). He pulled the slide back first. Since the loaded magazine was still inserted, he chambered a round. The officer was oblivious to his error, and he decided to function check the weapon. He pulled the trigger and shot a round into the clearing barrel. — *Thankfully, he had the weapon pointed in a safe direction (into the barrel), so no one was hurt. The obvious mistake was the procedural lapse by failing to eject the magazine. It's worth asking, though: Was it really necessary to function check the weapon by pulling the trigger? The function check serves no doctrinal purpose and is not something we teach Marines or Sailors to do at the clearing barrel. It is just something that has become an unofficial requirement. The only action necessary at the clearing barrel is to pull the charging handle/slide to the rear to visually check if a round is chambered. Had this Marine resisted the urge to dry fire the weapon, his relief may have identified the erroneously chambered round.*

Lessons Learned / Key Takeaways

We won't overcomplicate this guidance by trying to reinvent the wheel. We already have four weapons safety rules that will prevent almost any negligent discharge (*if abided by*), so let's simply review them.

- 1. Treat every weapon as if it were loaded.** And doubly verify the condition of the weapon. Three of these examples resulted from the user not realizing there was live ammo in their weapon.
- 2. Never point your weapon at anything you do not intend to shoot.** It's as simple as that. The weapon is designed to kill, so keep it oriented in a safe direction.
- 3. Keep your finger straight and off the trigger until you are ready to fire.** You should practice this rule enough to become muscle memory. With each weapons system, your hands should default to a safe position.
- 4. Keep your weapon on safe until you intend to fire.** This stop-gap mitigates the risk of people bumping into your weapon, the trigger catching on something (*like a flak jacket*), or whatever other anomaly might happen. It should be instinctual to switch to safe unless you are about to fire.

And remember ... let's be careful out there.