



# Naval Safety Center

## LESSONS LEARNED



LL 21-30

### OFF-DUTY FIREARMS MISHAPS (Episode VI)

***“Be careful what you shoot at. Most things in here don’t react too well to bullets”***

***— Sean Connery as CAPT Marco Ramius (The Hunt for Red October)***

Although we are members of the armed forces, that doesn’t necessarily mean we’re all good at handling arms. Another fiscal year has closed out, and we see the trend continues: More Sailors and Marines accidentally shoot themselves (*or each other*) off-duty than are shot by any enemy. And we continue to hurt ourselves with negligent discharges (ND) far more off-duty than on-duty (*200-300% more*), even though many of us handle loaded, dangerous weapons a lot during our day jobs.

As we said in the last firearms edition (LL 21-10), we still don’t care about the numbers. One ND injury is too many. And we see WAY too many. Please make it harder for us to find examples. Carry home your on-duty training, range discipline, and basic firearm safety rules. To help us all do that, it’s time to revisit the subject (*again...*).

- Superman can catch a bullet. You can’t. A Sailor recently purchased a new semi-automatic handgun and brought it to his friend’s house one evening. While visiting, according to the report, the Sailor grabbed the “first beer of the evening, and returned to the dining room to disassemble the weapon” (*NOT a good pairing of activities*). He removed the loaded magazine from the weapon and “racked the slide” three times to clear any rounds from the chamber (*but he did not LOOK in the chamber to verify*). The Sailor attempted to remove the slide, but it would not come off. He remembered that the slide couldn’t be removed with the weapon in the cocked position, so he “pulled the trigger to un-cock the weapon.” Evidently he didn’t have the weapon pointed in a safe direction ... because he shot himself. The bullet entered his left palm, traveled through his wrist and embedded in his forearm. — *The report said the Sailor had experience with firearms, had attended a concealed carry course, and knew better. Please, folks! Clear the chamber physically and visually. And don’t point a weapon at anything you don’t intend to shoot – that includes your left hand.*

- Back to the basics. A Sailor was cleaning his semi-automatic pistol at home. He removed the magazine but didn’t ensure the chamber was empty (*sigh*). As a result (*go figure*), he had a negligent discharge, shooting himself in the pointer finger of his right hand. – *Insert frowning emoticon here. Please, folks. It’s the basics.*

#### ***Firearm Safety Rule #1: Treat every firearm as if it is loaded.***

***If you treat every gun like it is loaded, “not realizing” or “forgetting” doesn’t hurt as much ... because you always “know” it is loaded.***

- How not to carry your gun. There are right ways and wrong ways to carry a firearm. In this case, a Sailor elected to carry his loaded handgun in the pocket of his trousers. According to the report, “while climbing the stairs to [his] home” with the gun in his pocket, it accidentally discharged. He shot himself in the leg and genitals. A friend rapidly drove him to the Emergency Room (ER). He received significant surgery, four days in the hospital, 12 days convalescent leave, 12 days light duty, and immeasurable pain. — *The report stated that the mishap Sailor “owns a personal handgun and has experience with range shooting/transporting.” If that was true, he should’ve known better. Well, he definitely has experience now. Learn from his pain: If you’re carrying or transporting a weapon, use a holster or a gun case.*

## OFF-DUTY FIREARMS MISHAPS (Episode VI)

- There is no such thing as a “safe” weapon. A service member (SVM) from one of our joint services was reportedly showing his shotgun to two other SVMs at an off-base residence, and he “pointed it at himself in a joking manner” (*NO! NO! NO!*). One of the others responsibly told him that he shouldn't do that with the weapon. Instead of listening, the SVM responded that “the shotgun was on safe,” just before it discharged unintentionally. He was pronounced dead at the scene. — *We beg you to learn from this tragedy. Firearms failures are not unique to the Navy and Marine Corps. We all must learn from each other.*
- Sock drawer or weapons cabinet? A Marine was retrieving an item from a clothing drawer in his hotel room. Evidently, he had chosen to store his loaded firearm, with a round in the chamber, in that drawer. So, while getting socks, a t-shirt, or whatever he needed, he “unintentionally depressed the trigger of his personal firearm.” The trigger didn't know that it was unintentional, so the gun worked 5.0, shooting him in the left hand. — *Locked and loaded weapon in a drawer. Blindly feeling around in aforementioned drawer. Lack of care for trigger safety. Put body parts in front of the barrel. Please do the opposite of all of this.*
- Too many mishap reports start this way. A Marine was hanging out at a friend's house and drinking (*that's not necessarily concerning...yet*). The report goes on to say the Marine “was handling a firearm” (*Why, oh why?!*). Guess what! The weapon discharged, and he shot himself in the thigh. — *We don't have the rest of the story, but the rest isn't needed to get to the point. Drinking is ok (in moderation). Firearms are ok (with wisdom). Drinking AND firearms are NOT ok together.*
- The four rules apply to long guns too. While visiting family, a Marine accidentally discharged his rifle, “causing a gunshot wound to his right calf.” — *That's all we know, except that he had to undergo surgery. Handguns aren't the only danger. If it goes “bang,” the four firearm rules still apply.*
- “Hey Beavis, listen to this” One evening, two Sailors were hanging out at a house. Sailor 1 was playing video games while Sailor 2 cleaned a handgun. Sailor 2 did not clear and safe the weapon. He removed the full magazine, and “did not realize” there was a round in the chamber (*sigh*). He then said to “Beavis,” “the trigger click sounds cool,” and pulled the trigger to show him. BANG! The gun worked perfectly, firing a round into his thigh, down through his leg, and exiting his shin. Both Sailors asked each other if they were ok (*the pain likely hadn't set in yet*). Sailor 2 realized he had shot himself, and Sailor 1 helped render first aid. Sailor 1 drove the victim to the ER. — *The report cites “complacency” and “a failure to follow basic weapons safety rules.” Ironically, the shooter/victim's primary job is (or at least, was) “armorer.” Please carry the safety rules home from work. If you treat every weapon like it's loaded, it will never matter if you “realize” a round is in the chamber or not.*

**Firearm Safety Rule #2: Never point a loaded weapon (see #1) at anything you don't intend to shoot. If you keep it pointed in a safe direction, even if you don't remember rules 3 and 4, nobody gets hurt.**

- So, how were the fries in the hospital cafeteria? One afternoon, a Sailor was driving to pick up food from a restaurant. He had his personal handgun in the vehicle cup holder (*not a good storage location*). As he turned a corner, unsurprisingly, “objects in the vehicle [including the gun] shifted around,” so the Sailor pulled over to put the gun into the center console (*good plan; better location; and he pulled over first*). While moving the firearm, he mishandled it and shot himself in the right leg (*poor execution*). He called 911, and medics took him to the ER. Surgeons had to use screws to put his leg bones back together. Three days in the hospital, 10 days sick in quarters (SIQ), and 10 days limited duty. — *We'll risk stating the obvious points: A) Please don't use a cup holder as a holster. B) Keep the gun pointed in a safe direction (not your leg). C) Keep your finger away from the trigger.*



# RANGE SAFETY

All guns are always loaded. Even this one.

## Key Takeaways / Lessons Learned

The lessons in these narratives have been learned repeatedly, but many new gun owners don't know them (or *don't believe they apply*). All of these incidents result from failing to follow the basics of firearm safety. There are four main, well-known firearm safety rules, but we'll continue to keep it simple by only focusing on the top two rules (search the web for the rest of the list), plus a bonus "Don't drink and..." addendum.

**1. Treat every firearm as if it is loaded.** This rule includes:

- ◆ A weapon you just unloaded (or *"think" you unloaded*).
- ◆ A weapon in the sock drawer or cup holder.
- ◆ Even a weapon you just dismantled (*you get the idea*).

**2. Never point a loaded weapon (see #1) at anything you don't intend to shoot.** This rule means "muzzle discipline." Don't ever let the muzzle cover anything you aren't willing to shoot, including:

- ◆ Any body parts you want to keep.
- ◆ Any friends you want to keep (*they will probably be UN-friendly after you shoot them*).
- ◆ The drywall of your room when someone is next door.

**3. Don't drink and handle guns.** #3 is not one of the official, "big four" firearm rules, because it should be obvious! We're sad that we have to include this in our "Don't drink and..." list (*which is growing weekly*). Ponder for a moment: If there is a legal limit to drive a car, how much sense does it make to drink that much (*and more*) and then handle a gun? Please don't mix alcohol and guns. Nothing good will come from it.



***And remember, "Let's be careful out there"***

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