



Naval Safety Center

LESSONS LEARNED



LL 21-31

HOLIDAY LADDER FALLS

"I have a step-ladder ... it's not my real ladder, but it still supports me." — Awful Dad Joke

With the holidays fast approaching, it's time to dig that 15-foot inflatable snowman out of the attic and drag the box of "25,000 imported Italian twinkle lights" off the shelf. While projector-lights beaming shapes and holiday scenes on houses are a recent trend, many prefer to go "old school," hanging lights directly on their home and trees. That's why a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) study found that during the holiday season, defined as November 1 to January 31, there were more than 5,800 fall injuries per season related to holiday decorating over three years. Approximately 43 percent of them were caused by falls from ladders.



In the Navy and Marine Corps, there were 231 shore on-duty, and 91 recreational off-duty ladder falls, resulting in 985 lost workdays and 90 hospital days over five years. Some (*but not all*) of the factors contributing to those falls were overreaching, incorrect ladder setup, improper use, and inappropriate ladder selection. Before you climb that ladder this season (*perhaps for the first time since you took the decorations down last February*), have a read, and learn from those who decorated and fell before you.

- I Got It ... No, I Don't. *Don't you hate it when you take that box of decorations off the shelf, and it's much heavier than you remember from last year? This Sailor hated it too.* He was on a ladder getting decorations from the garage shelf. When he pulled the container from the shelf, the shift in the center of gravity caused him to lose his balance, falling six feet to the floor. His wife drove him to the local military clinic, where they diagnosed him with a sprained ankle and gave him three days sick in quarters (SIQ) and 14 days light duty. — *Be careful with those heavy boxes, and have a helper to hand them to. Your body parts will be better off.*



- Are You OK, Clark? In an apparent outtake from the attic scene in National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation, a Marine injured his left elbow "when he fell off the ladder from his attic." X-rays at the emergency room (ER) revealed a fractured radial head (*that's medical speak for broken elbow*). They placed the Marine's arm in a sling and, since our Sergeant Griswold was already on light duty for a previous injury, he was awarded an additional seven days. — *If you're already on light duty, climbing into the attic is probably not a good idea. Whatever your duty status, this is another case for having a helper.*

- A Senior Moment. A senior Marine officer was installing Christmas lights at his home residence when he slipped and fell off a ladder, injuring his right wrist. He was later diagnosed with a hairline fracture. — *The report cites that the Marine "didn't follow the directions on the ladder." The report doesn't elaborate on which part of ladder safety he violated, but he probably won't do it again. Please pay attention to the directions and the warnings posted on the ladder.*

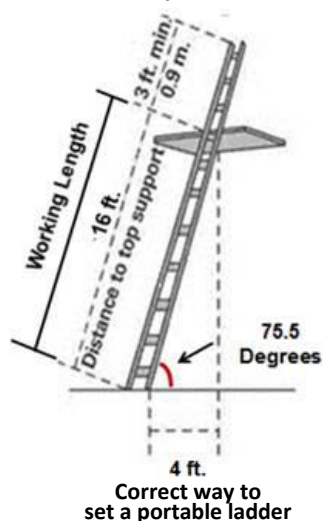
• **“Maple Chainsaw Massacre.”** Late one fall afternoon, a Sailor was standing on a seven-foot ladder cutting a damaged branch from a tree on his property with a chainsaw. As he was cutting the branch (*as often happens*), the branch swung down, striking the ladder, sending the ladder one way and the Sailor another (*primarily “down”*). When he hit the ground, he broke one rib, bruised his right lung, and fractured two vertebrae. — *Ouch! As awful as his injuries were, it’s fortunate the chainsaw didn’t cause even more. Ladders are hazardous, and chainsaws raise your risk level higher. Make sure you are stable on the ladder and, as with any cutting tool, keep clear of the cutting path and the path of potential swinging or dropping branches.*

• **Get ‘Er Done!** A Sailor was home moving boxes of decorations on the stairs when he tripped and fell, fracturing his fifth metacarpal (*pinky finger*). The report claims that the Sailor was “just trying to get it done.” — *We get it, it’s a couple of weeks till Christmas and you don’t have the decorations up yet. But rushing will only get you to the ER faster...and your decorations will still be waiting for you when you get home. Slow down, relax, and embrace the holidays.*

• **He’s no Ethan Hunt (*Mission Impossible*).** *This one’s not about a ladder, but we’ve seen so many Sailors and Marines falling off roofs and balconies, we had to include it.* A Sailor was at a friend’s house. They were on a balcony that was at the height of part of the roof, so they decided to walk onto it. For an unknown reason (*just*

like why he was walking on the roof in the first place), the Sailor stepped on a

skylight. Of course, the skylight gave way, and he fell two stories to the floor below, fracturing his left forearm. The report says the Sailor “did not need to be on a roof.” — *Ya think? Just because you can, doesn’t mean you should.*



• **♪Coming Down Is The Hardest Thing♪** Late one November evening, a Sailor went to his friend’s house to examine “recently completed work” on the home (*the report was mum on exactly what*). While on a ladder, one of the steps broke, causing the Sailor to fall 20 feet to the ground, landing on his back. Making matters worse, he hit his chin on the way down and was knocked unconscious (*yikes!*). At the ER, they found he had an orbital fracture (*broken eye socket*). — *Crikey! He was fortunate not to have been killed! This mishap emphasizes why it’s essential to keep a solid grip with your hands too. Please learn and remember!*

Key Takeaways

1. **Know how to use a ladder properly; there’s an App for that.** The NIOSH “Ladder Safety” app can be helpful, especially if you’re not a regular ladder user. The app includes a measuring tool for ladder angle and placement, ladder selection help, proper ladder use tools, and more. Knowing these tips could have averted an unexpected (*and fast*) trip to the ground for our unlucky Sailors/Marines.
2. **Know yourself and your limitations.** Handling weight on a ladder is not the same as on the ground, as some of us learned firsthand. Know your abilities before you find out the hard way that you can’t climb a ladder with a bin full of yard ornaments, and recruit a helper. If you’re a once-a-year ladder user, educate yourself on proper ladder setup and use. Those yellow caution statements on the ladder such as “Do not stand on or above this step” and “Do not overreach” are there for a reason.
3. **When in doubt (*always*), get a ladder holder.** The job doesn’t require much training, so ask anyone (*spouse, friend, neighbor, random stranger, etc.*) to hold the ladder for you. Please enjoy your holiday decorations without casts or crutches.

Remember, “Let’s be careful out there”