NAVAL SAFETY COMMAND
SAFETY AWARENESS DISPATCH
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High-Risk Training

High-risk training is one of the mainstays of the military. To train our Marines and Sailors for combat, we must put them through rigorous and realistic exercise. However, doing this type of "varsity-level" training on a regular basis can desensitize participants and instructors to the "high-risk" part. When we get too comfortable, and that healthy dose of fear fades away, that's when mayhem can creep in and show us just how dangerous this training can be. In each of these examples, our risk-taking warriors' actions or inactions led to painful lessons about what not to do.


USMC file photo, not associated with a mishap.

- *Knot* the Right Way to Rappel. Three Marines were set to work a rappelling station during a Spouse Warrior Day. One Marine wanted to rappel down the 30-foot vertical wall before the event and received permission to do so from the Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) at the station. The Marine was experienced with rappelling and joked that he didn't need a belay (a person on the ground who can help stop the rappeler if he loses control. *Alright, that's one safety feature gone*. The NCO stated the Marine should, at a minimum, have a back-up system. The NCO instructed him to use an 8-plate (a metal device a figure-8 knot is tied around, used to control descent), but the Marine misunderstood and did not use this for his rappel. *There's the second safety feature gone*. The Marine was given a Valdotain Tresse (VT) Prusik (a rope designed to tie a "prusik knot," a knot used to control descent). This VT Prusik was a new piece of equipment to the unit. Being inexperienced with this equipment, he tied his prusik knot incorrectly and the NCO erroneously approved the knot when he inspected it because he was equally unfamiliar with the VT. Additionally, per the manufacturer, the VT Prusik is not meant to be used as a primary rappel system, but only for a self-belay or as a backup. *And that's safety system three [and final] nullified*. The Marine stepped over the edge with his incorrect knot and immediately began to descend too fast. He attempted to gain control, but could not, and impacted the ground with bent knees and rolled to his back. He was fortunate to only end up with back sprains and bruised muscles. *—Rappelling can very easily become simply falling, as this Marine learned. This is the very reason we use redundant safety systems. Please use all of them.*

- The Lone Fish in the Pond. During open swim, a midshipman conducted "ditch and don" training where he held his breath underwater while removing and replacing his snorkel equipment. The midshipman did not have any instructors or safeguards in place and disregarded the posted instructions to not perform this type of training during open swim (*and he'd soon learn why that's not allowed)*. During the ditching and donning, he experienced shallow water blackout and lost consciousness (*and that's why*). The lifeguard was not expecting something like this and froze. Fortunately, fellow swimmers noticed him become unconscious and got him out of the pool and revived him. *—Many aquatic training events are considered high-risk and have stringent policies like ensuring dedicated safety personnel who know how to respond are aware of the event. "By yourself" is not the time to do challenging aquatic drills.*

- Look Out Below! During helicopter fast-rope training, a group of Marines was tasked with holding the fast-ropes down and out of the way in between iterations to keep them from blowing around in the rotor wash. They were briefed on the commands for when to grab the rope, when to release, and when the crew chief was going to cut the rope. They were not, however, told to wear any PPE other than hearing and eye protection. Thirty minutes into training, the helicopter crew chief cut the line, but neglected to give the command beforehand (*oops… bombs away!).* The rope fell more than 20 feet, and its metal connector ring struck a Marine's uncovered head. A CT scan confirmed there was no brain damage, but the Marine went home with a huge laceration. *—During high-risk training it can be easy to hyper-focus on obvious hazards, like the guys jumping out of the helicopters, and forget the little things, like stuff falling onto people on the ground. Yes, mitigate the big stuff, but don't neglect the little stuff.*

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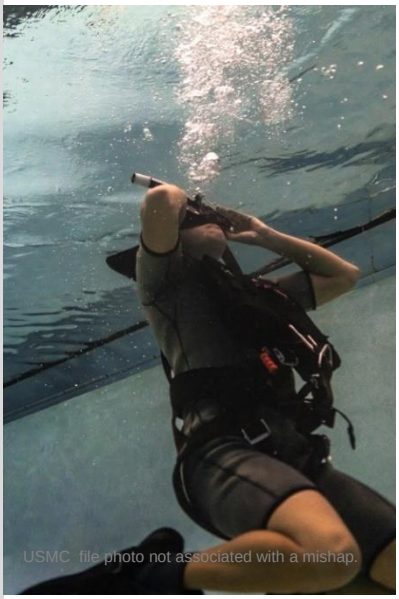

- Rope Fail. During command PT, a Marine used a fast rope connected to an I-beam for climbing. While partly up the rope, the connection point broke, and the Marine fell to the concrete floor sustaining a bruised hip and fractured wrist (*Yikes!*). After looking into the incident, the unit realized they needed to conduct regular inspections on this type of gear *(hmm, you don't say)*. They also determined they needed to designate the event as high risk and assign a high-risk training officer. *—During routine things like PT, it's easy to overlook things that are high risk, like rope climbs. Be vigilant during each event. Side note: We commend the unit for identifying their problems regarding gear inspections, but they said nothing about climbing ropes over concrete! Rope climbing and other similar events require an impact medium (typically mulch or rubber) of a certain depth specific to the obstacle's height.*

- All *Not* Clear. During a rescue swimmer course, a Sailor was conducting mask clearing training. He successfully cleared his mask at 4- and 8-feet depths, but at 12 feet felt a pain in his left ear. The instructors at this course were known for belittling students who struggled, so the Sailor tried to continue training despite the pain. The Sailor continued to try to clear his mask 12 more times, at which point he felt like his ear had burst. He notified the instructors and was sent to medical, where he was misdiagnosed with a ruptured ear drum. After three weeks of continued ear pain, the Sailor eventually made his way to an Ear Nose Throat (ENT) doctor who discovered the Sailor had a perilymphatic fistula (a tear in the membrane between the inner and middle ear) and required surgery to repair it. *—There is motivation and there is negative motivation. Negative motivation is already ineffective by comparison but is downright dangerous when it comes to high-risk training. Try properly training and encouraging your personnel instead.*

- Know When to Say When. We'll end on a slightly lighter note with a Marine who didn't know when to stop. He was running the obstacle course and felt a sharp pain in his ribs when he attempted to do a "college boy roll" on the high bar obstacle. He continued through almost the whole course despite the pain but had to throw in the towel at the rope climb obstacle. He was sent for x-rays, and was told he had previously broken multiple ribs, and now fractured three more. The initial injury likely happened four months prior when he felt pain in his chest after buddy-rushing with 60 extra pounds more than he normally carried. The original injury was misdiagnosed by medical as a muscle strain. The Marine then carried on through various other field exercises over the next four months until the incident on the obstacle course. *—There is toughness, then there is bullheadedness. There's a difference. It's okay to trust the Doc's initial judgment, but if the pain continues go back to reevaluate! Being sidelined from injury isn't helping you or your unit. Train hard, but don't break yourself in the process.*

Key Takeaways

High-risk training should never be taken lightly, but we can all too easily lose sight of the hazards associated with our forces' various training types. We can become vulnerable to mishaps due to several reasons from overconfidence to complacency or poor risk assessment to name a few. Consider the following points to help best manage your high-risk training program:

1. **Where's your high-risk training safety officer**? Navy and Marine Corps doctrine requires a designated training safety officer for commands that conduct high-risk training. Make use of this person, it's required. If you don't have one, designate one and make sure they're well versed on the safety rules of each high-risk training event.

2. **Pay attention to the whole picture**. High-risk training is typically complex. It can be easy to be drawn into one aspect of the evolution because it's the most hazardous, but that doesn't mean there aren't other hazards to mitigate.

3. **Be vigilant**. Repetition can make us complacent to hazards associated with high-risk training. Don't let your proficiency or frequency blind you to the risks and hazards around you.

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