



NAVAL SAFETY COMMAND SAFETY AWARENESS DISPATCH



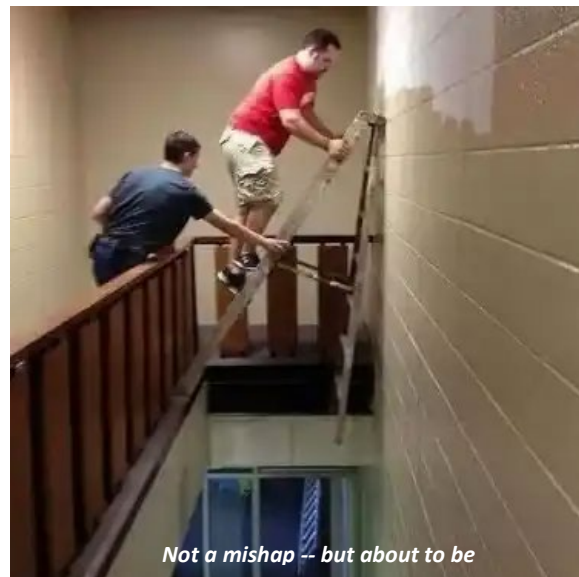
SA 25-25

Ladder Falls

Fall is nearly upon us here in the northern hemisphere. With the season, we expect more folks out on ladders—cleaning gutters, trimming tree branches, hanging holiday lights, etc.—and some of those folks falling off them. If you're about to head up those rungs, please read and remember these examples of the others who went up... and then down really fast. We haven't said it in a while, so we'll repeat our old mantra:

It's better to read and learn than bleed and learn.

- **Chainsaw Juggling.** A Chief Petty Officer was on a ladder; trimming a tree; with a chainsaw... and he fell. As he fell, he threw the chainsaw (*probably smart*), but his legs got caught between rungs of ladder causing a hematoma (a fancy word for bruises). —*The report says it beautifully: "Member was on a ladder using a tool that required two hands. This meant he wasn't able to maintain three points of contact. Additionally, there was no fall protection used."* If you're going to work hands-free on a ladder, particularly high up, it's smart to get someone to hold the ladder for you and maybe consider a safety harness. That goes double if you're using a tool that can sever parts of your body.
- **"You Never Can Tell With Bees..."** An off-duty Sailor was helping a neighbor install flashing on their air conditioning unit. While the Sailor was on a ladder about five feet from the ground, he found an unexpected wasp nest. In an instinctive "fight or flight" response (*he chose "flight"*) to get away from the nest, he jumped/fell off the ladder and landed on his wrist. He then drove himself to the emergency room (ER), where the doctors confirmed his wrist was fractured, immobilized it in a cast, and gave him 30 days of light duty until a follow-up visit. The report says he used the ladder properly -- the problem was panic and his attempt to bail out. —*What do you suppose hurts more – a wasp sting or a broken wrist? We don't fault him for his instinctive human reaction: "Wasp! Bad! Must get away!" We'd have the same reaction. The key learning point here is to remain calm, don't rush, and go back down the ladder the way you came up.*
- **Wile E. Coyote (Super-Genius).** A senior Sailor was working a construction project. He placed a concrete block on top of a ladder, but then he needed to move the ladder (*What do you think he should have done next, boys and girls? Right! Get the block down*). Well, he didn't move the block. So, when he tried to adjust the ladder, the block fell and hit him on the lip. Next steps: Pause construction work. Go to clinic. Get stitches. Tell embarrassing story to your fellow workers about how you hit yourself with a block. —*We're pretty sure we saw this happen on Saturday-morning cartoons as a kid. It must've been a glancing blow or the injuries would have been worse than a busted lip. Keep your wits about you and move stuff off the ladder before you move the ladder.*
- **Smoking is Bad For You in More Ways Than One.** A "seasoned" government employee (*old enough to know better*) was on a ladder fixing the roof of a smoking gazebo. The ladder feet were in a gravel area (*not even or entirely stable*) and the ladder tipped, causing him to slip, spraining his shoulder. He finished his work shift and went to the ER the next day due to the pain, then took two weeks off from work to recover. —*Sometimes you can't choose the ground you're working on, but you can take time to smooth out the surface or, as the report recommends, have someone help by holding the ladder.*



Ladder Falls

• **Look Ma! No Hands!** On a lovely afternoon, a Sailor was on leave replacing roof shingles on his shed. The shed was about 15 feet tall and he was using a metal extension ladder to go up and down. The top of the ladder extended about 1 foot above the top edge of the shed. At the end of the day's work, he gathered the unused shingles in both arms and, the report says, "attempted" to descend the ladder using only his legs (*are you concerned yet? If so, you're already doing better than our Sailor*). His right foot made it onto the top rung, but his left foot—and the rest of him—completely missed the ladder. He and the shingles hit the ground as fast as gravity could take them. As he hit, he tried to break his fall using his right hand, which mostly just broke his hand. Although he must've been in some pain from the 15-foot drop onto his right side – not to mention his broken hand – he stood up and "didn't immediately identify any injuries." So, he just went on with life. When he tried to go golfing the next day, he realized "it was difficult and painful to hold the golf club," so at last he perceived he might have an injury and drove himself to the ER. —*The top of a ladder should be at least 3 feet higher than the surface you're working on, so you have hand holds for when you get on and off the ladder. But none if that matters if you don't even use your hands! People commonly die from ladder falls as low as 8 feet. This fellow is hugely lucky all he got was a broken hand. Please don't ever do it like he did. Get a tall enough ladder and use your hands as you go up and down.*



Key Takeaways

We confess that we've made our own poor ladder choices in the past. Even as we laugh a little at these events, we're cringing at how close we've come to being one of them. Every time we get on a ladder now, we're thinking "I don't want to wind up in one of those reports." We hope you'll do the same. Please learn from their hard-earned lessons and keep these points in mind the next time you need to do something above ground level.

- 1. Don't improvise.** Get the right ladder for the job. Stacking stuff to stand on or inventing a new way to use the wrong ladder you've already got is too risky. Borrow, rent, or buy one; it'll cost less time and money than the ER visit.
- 2. The top step isn't the top step.** Those warning stickers on ladders are there for a reason. The top step of an extension ladder or step ladder isn't a place for you to step on. The center of gravity is too high for the ladder to stay stable.
- 3. Have a battle buddy.** Get someone to help, especially if the ground isn't level or if you're going up high. They can hold the ladder to keep it steady; they can offer some forceful backup ("*Hey Joe, are you sure you want to do that...?*") and they can call 911 if you do fall off.
- 4. Use your hands.** This isn't soccer. You can and should use your hands on the ladder. If you've got to hold something (like a saw), then consider a safety harness and refer back to #3 to get help to hold the ladder and supervise.

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