



# NAVAL SAFETY COMMAND SAFETY AWARENESS DISPATCH SA 26-11



## Falling Through Openings Mishaps

Fall-through hazards are a serious safety concern in shipboard and industrial environments where open hatches, removed deckplates, ladderwells and other deck openings are present. A fall through one of these openings can lead to severe injuries and may create additional risk to personnel responding to the incident. The following mishaps highlight how quickly these incidents can occur and reinforce the importance of properly securing deck openings and maintaining effective barriers and markings to ensure clear communication during daily operations.

### Deckplate Disaster

A Sailor on board a ship stepped onto a loose-fitting deckplate, which shifted, causing him to fall forward through the deck opening. As he attempted to catch himself, he extended his left arm, and his wrist struck a bulkhead. The servicemember reported to medical, where an X-ray confirmed a fracture in the left hand, resulting in placement of a cast. The investigation determined the mishap occurred due to unsatisfactory deck maintenance in the space, as the deckplate wasn't properly secured and no additional safety measures had been put in place at the time. – *This incident highlights the importance of ensuring deckplates are properly installed, inspected and secured before work begins.*



### Barricade Breach

A Sailor was removing PKP fire bottles from flight deck catwalks and entered a barricaded danger area to get a bottle located on the other side of the barricade (*what could possibly be the reason for this barricade?*). The area was secured and the barricade installed because there was a large 3 x 3-foot hole in the catwalk (*ah, that's the reason*). The Sailor grabbed the bottle, stepped back and fell right through the opening to the level below. The Sailor suffered a temporary loss of consciousness after striking his head on the lower catwalk and a hand laceration. Emergency response personnel used a crane to transport the Sailor off the flight deck in a stretcher for medical treatment which included stitches, five days SIQ and 14 days light limited duty. – *Barricades are there for a reason. Disregarding them and entering restricted areas is asking for trouble. Always ensure there's competent supervision and clear communication on hazards, maintain situational awareness when working around openings or fall hazards, even when not in restricted areas.*

### Avoid the Void

A Sailor entered her darkened berthing and was heading to her rack (*an apparently lofty ambition*), when she fell 10 feet through an unmarked and unsecured open deck access cover into a void below. The Sailor called for help and after nearby personnel assisted her out of the void, she was evaluated at medical and received one day SIQ and seven days light limited duty. Workers opened the access cover to conduct maintenance but didn't install any barriers or stage a watch around the fall hazard. This hazard was exacerbated by the limited lighting in the berthing at the time of the incident. – *The workers who left this deck access cover open and unsecured unwittingly left a de facto trap for the residents of this berthing. This incident emphasizes the importance of properly covering deck openings and utilizing barricade warning measures around fall hazards.*

### Ladderwell Misstep

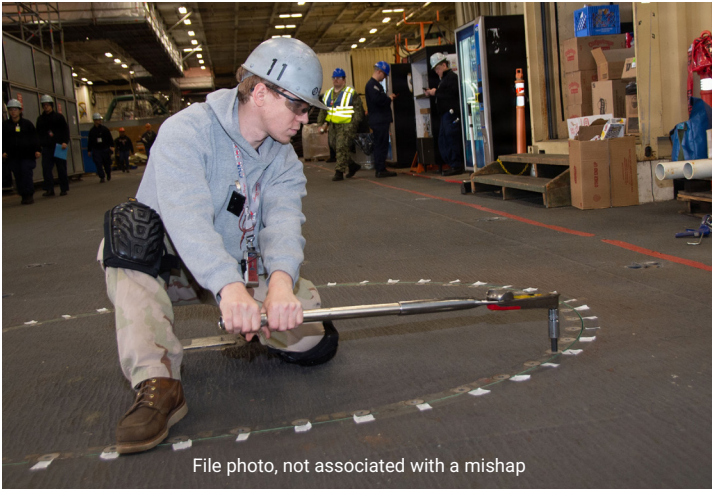
A Sailor transited a ladder to an upper level searching for a valve located in an outboard area. The ladderwell access was partially guarded by a hatch and chain on two sides, leaving the approximately 4 x 4-foot opening unprotected when the hatch was raised. Instead of lowering the hatch and crossing safely, the Sailor attempted to cross over the ladderwell hatch (*PARKOUR*), the servicemember reached for the chain on the opposite side but missed their step and fell through the opening, roughly seven feet to the lower level (*ooh, PAR-FALL*). Although the Sailor landed on their feet,

they lost their balance and fell backward into a valve handle, which caused a large bruise on their back. The report noted that the Sailor took an unnecessary risk in attempting to cross the open hatch instead of closing it first. – *Avoiding shortcuts helps prevent injury. Take the extra time to properly secure the hatch and use safe access routes to prevent fall hazards and injuries.*

## Hidden Hatch Hazard

A Sailor performing routine maintenance on a small boat fell through an open hatch on the top deck. The Sailor was able to catch themselves before falling all the way down to the Thruster/Engine Room deck below, but still sustained injuries to their left side, lower back, and neck, earning them three days SIQ and 14 days light limited duty. The hatch opening had been improperly covered with a piece of cardboard during hatch maintenance and lacked proper markings or warnings (*this feels like a trap you'd find on a Saturday morning cartoon*). – *Properly securing hatch openings with approved covers and clearly marking hazards with proper signage or notices is crucial. Temporary, non-walkable materials such as cardboard create hidden fall hazards that can lead to serious injury.*

## Another Hidden Hatch



File photo, not associated with a mishap

A Sailor assigned to a cleanup crew approached a pallet placed on top of a smoke blanket in what appeared to be a normal work area in the hangar bay and attempted to lift it. Unbeknownst to the Sailor, the pallet and smoke blanket were covering an open-deck hatch that had recently been removed by contractors (*seriously, is Wile E. Coyote running around these sites?*). When the Sailor lifted the pallet, they fell through the smoke blanket and into the space below. The Sailor sustained lacerations to the left wrist and head requiring sutures and X-rays revealed injuries to the lumbar spine. The investigation pointed out a lack of clear communication from supervisors and the absence of obvious barriers or proper markings around the open hatch. – *Again, open-deck hatches must be properly barricaded and clearly marked, a smoke blanket and pallet are neither*

*of those things. Also, maintaining clear communication of hazard during maintenance operations is crucial. The Sailor probably would have liked to know there was a big opening they could have fallen through.*

## Key Takeaways

Fall-through hazards are present in many work environments and personnel must be diligent in looking out for them. Keep the following in mind as you move about your workspaces:

- 1. Secure and guard deck openings.** Open hatches, removed deckplates and ladderwells must be properly covered, barricaded, or guarded with approved barriers. Improper coverings can create hidden hazards.
- 2. Respect barricades and warning signs.** Barricades are placed to prevent entry into dangerous areas. Do not bypass them without proper authorization and hazard controls in place.
- 3. Maintain situational awareness.** Slow down, watch your footing, and verify walking surfaces, especially in low light or active maintenance areas.
- 4. Communicate hazards.** Ensure open deckplates, removed hatches, or other fall hazards are clearly communicated and marked so others are aware of the risk.

Fall prevention is a shared responsibility, and proper hazard control and awareness can prevent serious injuries.

*And remember, “Let’s be careful out there”*