



NAVAL SAFETY COMMAND

SAFETY AWARENESS DISPATCH



SA 23-14

Off-Duty Firearms Mishaps (Edition VIII)

Once again, we return to our most recurring safety awareness dispatch, off-duty firearms mishaps. We're revisiting the topic because we continue to see examples in our database of Marines and Sailors demonstrating poor weapons handling. It's time for a reminder that it only takes a moment of misjudgment (*or no judgment*) to have painful consequences. With that thought in mind, let's dive into some of the latest off-duty firearms mishaps.

- It Wasn't Me, it Was The Holster. A Marine was practicing transition drills with his personally owned 9mm pistol. He would simulate holding a rifle and firing two rounds, then lowering the rifle and drawing his actual pistol from his hip holster, firing a shot, then putting the pistol on safe and holstering it. During the drill, however, the tension screws on the holster were too tight and the Marine could not draw. He pushed his hand down on the pistol to get a better grip, which caused the trigger to depress inside the holster. At that moment, he discovered he didn't put the weapon back on safe after the previous drill. As the trigger was depressed, it did what any loaded gun not on safe would do. It fired a round...into his leg. — *There are two teaching moments here. First, test your gear before going live. Second, if you're going to try cool tactical drills, you should probably master basic weapons safety rules first, or better yet, save the tactical training for a professionally-led event.*
- Let's Try to Pay Attention to Where We're Aiming. A Marine was dove hunting near his home with a 20-gauge shotgun. He was "sitting on a bucket" at his usual hunting spot. He must have been taking a break because the report stated he was caught off guard when a dove flew overhead...while he was dove hunting. Not wanting to miss his quarry, he quickly tried to aim and fire, except his quick movement caused him to lose his balance on his trusty bucket. He missed the bird, but unfortunately, not his foot. He required multiple surgeries over several months. — *Rushing a shot is an excellent way to miss or shoot something you don't want to. Sometimes you're better off waiting for the next opportunity. There will be more doves.*
- Sure, Let's Blame The Holster Again. A Sailor with a concealed carry permit was getting ready to leave the house with his .45 caliber 1911 holstered at his waist. He bent over to get his boots and the pistol fell out of the holster. When it hit the ground, the firing pin struck the chambered round discharging a bullet into his chest. It, fortunately, missed all vital organs. — *If only there were some type of thumb safety on the 1911 to keep it from firing when you don't intend it to...Oh yeah, there is! Please use it.*
- A Valiant Effort. This incident occurred while a Sailor was trying to teach their spouse and friend—we kid you not—handgun safety. Whatever lesson he was teaching, he must have skipped over the four weapons safety rules. The problem started when the Sailor/instructor placed the gun on the table without putting the safety on. As he stepped away, his friend decided to pick up the firearm and must not have known the "keeping his finger off the trigger" bit (*or the "safe direction" bit*) because he discharged the weapon, shooting the Sailor/instructor in the arm — *Oh, the irony. When teaching weapons handling—before anyone ever touches a gun—the first and most important thing is to ensure everyone knows and understands the four weapons safety rules. Do "classroom" time before range time.*
- The Not-so-Safest Place to Store Your Gun. In pursuit of a better home defense plan, a Sailor began storing his Glock pistol under his mattress (*you know, so that the gun fairy would bring him ammo*). He previously stored it unloaded in a custom gun holster/stand but decided he wanted to make it less visible if someone else came into the house. It's worth noting here that he had a history of grabbing items in his sleep (*probably a factor he should have considered*). No more than three days after moving his gun to its



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new (unsafe) home, his hand began wandering in his sleep and found its way to the weapon (*which was stored loaded, with a round in the chamber*). The Sailor woke to his ears ringing, blood spraying, and a piece of his finger blown off. — *Okay, folks, we get the idea that you want to be able to defend yourself as quickly as possible against home intrusion, but the statistics don't lie: Storing your gun by your bed—whether it's on the nightstand, in a holster, or under the mattress (SMH)—drastically increases the chance of a mishap. Even if you don't sleepwalk or grab things in your sleep, keeping your gun by the bed means you might be holding your weapon while you're still in the half-daze of waking up, which is not a state of mind to be handling a firearm, even if someone is breaking into your house. The few extra seconds it takes to retrieve a gun from a safe or other more deliberate compartment gives you the time to regain the necessary consciousness to handle your weapon correctly. You'll defend yourself more effectively.*

Key Takeaways

We've gone over them before — but we'll go over them again — because some people keep messing them up. If you follow these rules, which are the core of safe weapons handling, shooting yourself or someone else accidentally is nearly impossible. (*Note: We've added a bonus rule #5 about firearm storage because 1-4 were never designed for "sleep shooting"*).

1. **Treat every weapon as if it is loaded.** Whether you are about to shoot it, show it, store it, clean it, or whatever, always treat a weapon as if it's loaded. Rule 1 is the foundation for all the other rules!

2. **Never point a weapon at anything you don't intend to shoot.** (*Why? Because it's loaded*). If you follow this one, even if the weapon goes off unintentionally, nobody will get hurt.

3. **Keep your finger straight and off the trigger until you are ready to fire.** (*Why? Because it's loaded*). Squeezing the trigger should be the most intentional thing you do. If your finger "slips while holstering" or "bumping into something causes you to pull the trigger" or whatever other excuse, that means you haven't developed the muscle memory to keep your finger in the right spot. You only move it to the trigger when you are ready to fire.

4. **Keep your weapon on safe until you intend to fire.** (*Why?*). Follow this rule and the gun won't discharge accidentally. We hear "it fell on the ground and went off," "it fired while being holstered," and the like all too often. None of those scenarios should happen to a gun with a safety on. The only time the safety should be disengaged is the exact moment before firing the weapon.

5. **Store your firearms safely.** (*You know why...*).

As demonstrated by our friend with the mattress gun, how you store your weapons is as important as safely handling them. Studies show that when gun owners stowed their weapons unloaded and locked, with the ammunition separated, there were fewer unintentional or impulsive firearm discharges, including suicides. Aside from the studies, common sense dictates that taking a few extra seconds to have a clear mind before you have a loaded weapon in your hands is safer, and safe storage keeps others, like your children, from having access.*

Remember it this way: **Unload, Lock and Separate.**

**Final editorial thought: Using a weapon should be your*

last line of home defense, not your first. Locked doors and windows and alarm systems are effective deterrents.



¹ Miller, Azrael, Hemenway, Vrinotis (2005). Firearms storage practices and rates of unintentional firearm deaths in the United States. National Library of Medicine. 37 (4) 661-7

² Shenassa, Rogers, Spalding, Roberts (2004). J Epidemiol Community Health 04 (58) 841-848 Safer storage of firearms at home and risk of suicide: a study of protective factors in a nationally representative sample

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