



NAVAL SAFETY COMMAND SAFETY AWARENESS DISPATCH



SA 24-04

Knife Mishaps III

*"...Never cut with a knife what you can cut with a spoon."
—Charles Buxton, American poet*

Knives are one of humankind's oldest tools (*and weapons*). They're great for a very specific purpose, cutting things, and they do the job well. Whatever is in the blade's path, whether it's a mastodon hide, nylon line or anything "cut-able," knives don't discriminate. They will cut whatever and wherever you point them if you aren't mindful of where the blade is moving or about to move. To reinforce our *point*, a quick gander in our database revealed more than 130 knife-related mishaps in fiscal year 2023, totaling more than 470 lost workdays. All but one mishap were human error-related.

As we illustrated in our last two editions on the topic, using a knife as the wrong tool topped the injury list with 27% of the mishaps. Cutting zip ties was once again the most common infraction, followed by cutting plastic packaging. Cutting food (*primarily veggies*) accounted for 21% of the mishaps, with mishandling accounting for roughly 12%. With the stats out of the way, we hope you'll *carve* out a few more minutes of your day to read the stories of our "knights of the knife" and take a moment to consider your knife-handling habits.



- Good Shipmate, Poor Execution. A Sailor was helping a friend assemble furniture in their new house. When he began building the couch, the Sailor had to cut zip ties to get out the legs. As he attempted to cut one of the zip ties—with a knife—his knife slipped, causing him to unintentionally stab himself in the leg about an inch deep and 2 inches long. The report notes the laceration began to bleed (*we would imagine so!*), so his friend gave him a shirt to help stop the bleeding and drove him to the local ER, where he received stitches. —*Knives will indeed cut zip ties, but the action is usually a violent SNAP and the knife usually keeps traveling. Most types of wire cutters are a safer option. Check the web; there are cutters specifically made for zip ties, too.*
- It's the Pits. A Sailor was in his barracks preparing a meal for himself. He opened an avocado with a knife and attempted to remove the pit from the avocado by—*drum roll*—**stabbing** the pit and twisting to remove it. The Sailor hit his mark on the stab, but with such force that the knife went through the pit into his palm. He immediately went to base medical (*his first wise choice*), where he was treated for his wound and given 14 days of light duty. —*Nearly every avocado mishap in our database happens this way. Now, close your eyes and imagine you have a knife in one hand and you're stabbing toward your other hand, but with no avocado in it and you need to stop the motion just before you stab yourself. Got the visual? Good, it made us squirm too. So, don't do that. Doctors see avocado slicing injuries so much they even have a name for it: Avocado Hand. Slice the avocado on a flat surface (not in your hand). Then just scoop out the pit with a spoon or other dull utensil to stay out of the ER and our database.*
- ♪ You Gotta Keep Em Separated! ♪. A Marine was attempting to separate frozen burger patties with a knife when it slipped and sliced his middle finger, requiring eight stitches. That information was the gist of the report, so we'll assume the Marine was holding or supporting the stack of frozen burger patties with his other hand. —*Cue the visual from the previous story! In this mishap, the knife wasn't necessarily the wrong tool; instead, the execution was terrible. As we say in firearms safety, "Don't point the firearm (knife) toward anything you don't want to shoot (slice)."*
- It's Not Like Passing the Baton. Sailor 1 was whipping the mooring lines with help from his shipmate (Sailor 2) to repair a frayed line. Sailor 2 asked Sailor 1 if he could use his knife to cut lines, and Sailor 1 obliged, opening his knife and reaching out to hand it to Sailor 2, blade down. Not looking (*SMH*), Sailor 2 reached back to grab the knife from Sailor 1 but...he missed the handoff. Instead, Sailor 2 bumped the knife

Knife Mishaps III

handle and the blade punctured Sailor 1's thigh just above his knee, deep enough that he required stitches. —*There's a standard best practice that you should fold a knife before handing it over, but if the situation doesn't allow for folding or fixed blade knives, Sailor 1 did properly hand the knife handle first. The critical point here, though, is—it's not a baton relay race—you shouldn't blindly reach for an open knife, lest you or your shipmate get "bit."*



- **Just Because You Can Doesn't Mean You Should.** A Sailor was opening a five-gallon paint can with a knife when the knife slipped and he jabbed his left hand. The Sailor reported to Medical, where he was treated for the laceration and received 10 days of light duty. —*In this "wrong tool for the job" scenario, the Sailor likely used the only tool he had at the moment. The report says that lack of supervision was a factor, and we agree. Special tools are made for opening those metal tabs on five-gallon paint cans, but even a screwdriver would have worked better and safer. Supervisors, make sure your teams have the right tools for the job.*

- **Let it go, Let it Go!** A Sailor pulled out his pocket knife to use it, and while opening it, he dropped it. The Sailor tried to catch his knife (Nooooo!), which resulted in a laceration on his finger, four stitches and five days of light duty. —*To say you must maintain positive control of your knife is an understatement. However, if you drop it, resist the urge to try to catch it. It will survive the fall. Sing it with us, "Let it go, Let it go-o..."*

- **Let Me Show Ya Somethin'!** A Sailor was taking a break from doing administrative work (*we hear ya*) and decided to visit an adjoining workshop and "bond with the reservist on deck," according to the report. He pulled out his personal knife and attempted to demonstrate its safety features. The report is mum on the specific features the Sailor was showcasing. Still, in classic Fire Marshall Bill* fashion, he "demonstrated" them on his right arm, apparently stabbing himself in the process. Unaware of his wound, the Sailor put the knife into its carrying case and noticed blood flowing down his arm. He attempted to stop the bleeding with paper towels to no avail and felt himself going into shock. Other Sailors in the shop called emergency services, who transported him to the ER, where he received two stitches. —*Regardless of your knife's safety features, please don't test or demonstrate them on human flesh. This Sailor's overconfidence or lack of knowledge of his knife's safety features cost him stitches and a fair amount of blood loss.*

**If you haven't heard of Fire Marshal Bill (Jim Carrey), web search him; he won't disappoint.*

- **Not the Sharpest Knife.** Quoting from the report, a Sailor "became bored in his barracks room and decided to repeatedly toss his pocketknife up in the air (*cue "Entry of the Gladiators," AKA the circus song*). All of a sudden, [he] lost concentration, failed to catch the knife in the air properly and got stabbed..." (*why are we not surprised...*). His hand started bleeding (*also not surprising*), so he applied bandages and reported to medical, where his wound was glued and bandaged. —*If you get bored, we'd prefer you not throw sharp objects into the air and try to catch them. Respect the knife as a potentially dangerous tool and leave the knife juggling to the professionals.*

Key Takeaways

1. **Knives aren't screwdrivers, hammers or wire cutters.** Sometimes, if all you have is a knife, everything looks like a vegetable. If our Sailors and Marines would take a moment to grab the correct tool for the job, we'd *cut* our knife mishap rate by nearly one-third. We get it. It's easy to just pull out the knife you already have on you, but taking the time to grab the proper tool will save you pain and time in the ER.
2. **Respect the blade.** Knives don't seem to command the respect they deserve. No license or training is required and they usually don't come with an owner's manual, but perhaps they should, given the injuries they cause when misused. Treat your knife like a highly effective cutting tool by practicing good blade safety. As with firearms, always point (cut) in a safe direction. Be aware of what you are cutting and what is behind it (cut away from your body parts.).

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