



# NAVAL SAFETY COMMAND

## SAFETY AWARENESS DISPATCH



SA 24-31

### Autumn Outdoor Mishaps

*"I've been hiking. The first thing you notice when you go hiking is it's a mistake."  
—Comedian Jim Gaffigan*

For those of us living in the continental US, it appears that the 95+ degree days are mostly behind us. Along with the dropping temps come changes in the outdoor activities we love, like hiking, camping, and hunting, to name a few. Granted, service members and civilian employees are enjoying the great outdoors around the world every day (*it's not fall everywhere*), but indulge us for a couple minutes as we account for some of their fall-like misadventures so that you may enjoy a pumpkin spice latte by the campfire rather than a trip to the Emergency Room (ER). Those ER trips and lost days add up quickly and weaken our naval warfighting readiness. In fact, just the seven examples in this dispatch cost more than 130 thousand dollars and totaled more than 315 lost workdays. Read on and learn from the missteps of our "warriors of the wilderness," as you enjoy your favorite activities in the great outdoors.



- I'll Have a Slice with Extra Dirt. A Sailor was at a campfire with friends eating pizza one night. A few hours later, he decided to head back to the cabin—in the dark—with no flashlight—in flip-flops—carrying a slice of pizza. As expected, he tripped and fell on the hard-packed dirt, hitting his cheek and shoulder. He waited for a couple of days, but the pain didn't subside, so he went to the ER, where he was treated for a broken right cheekbone and issued 30 days of light duty. —*With so many factors working against you, you're bound to end up on the ground with a painful injury, and dirt on your pizza. If it's dark at the campsite, a flashlight and/or shoes might save your face and your dinner.*
- Get a Grip. The report narrative starts like this, "While rock climbing without any safety equipment..." (*well, we know where this is going right off the bat*). A Marine lost his grip and fell approximately 15 feet, dislocating his finger and spraining his wrist. He was later diagnosed with a concussion as well and given 30 days of light duty. —*We bet this Marine wears his safety gear when rappelling or fast-roping on duty, so why not off duty? The ground is just as hard, no matter your duty status. Wear a helmet and use the proper gear like safety ropes or crash mats.*
- Not What Indiana Jones Would Do. *We may have told this story a while ago, but it's so outrageous (and true, according to the report) that it bears repeating.* A Sailor was on two weeks of leave to visit family. However, he altered his plans and instead went backpacking alone. With no defined trails and limited cell phone coverage, he set out on his hike. Six hours into the hike, the Sailor decided to stop and set up camp for the evening. In search of firewood, he chose a partially buried tree stump and wrapped his arms around it in an attempt to free it. While gripping the stump, he heard the familiar sound -- of a rattlesnake. He quickly let go of the stump, but when he retracted his hands, the snake was attached to his left thumb. He shook the snake off, but it had already bitten him. Fearful for his life and concerned that he was hours away from medical care and had no cellular signal, he quickly rationalized that he needed to amputate his thumb to survive. His method? Shooting his thumb off with his .45 caliber handgun! The round passed through his thumb, leaving it burned and bleeding, but not amputated. He used a set of shears to finish the job and immediately improvised a tourniquet to stop the arterial bleeding. The Sailor hiked six hours back to his truck and drove another two hours to the hospital, where he was treated for his self-inflicted injury. BTW, according to the toxicology report, the snake did not inject venom, which is apparently common. He spent two days in the hospital, followed by 212 days of light duty. —*Besides the obvious lesson, "Don't shoot off your body parts when bitten by a snake," there are some useful teaching points here. Hiking long distances*

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from civilization alone with no communication is a terrible idea. Take a buddy, stay in communication range, and don't blindly reach behind stumps and fallen logs. Have an emergency plan that doesn't include amputation by firearm.



- **“Wood” You Wear Eye Protection?** While a Sailor was chopping wood for a campfire, a chunk of the wood flew up and hit him in the face. He suffered lacerations to his cheek and forehead, requiring an unknown number of stitches. The injuries were serious enough that the Sailor was placed sick in quarters for four days. —*There isn't PPE to cover every possible contingency reasonably, but this Sailor was lucky he wasn't struck in the eye. Wear eye protection while chopping wood because, unlike the rattlesnake in our earlier story, there's no*

*warning before pain strikes. Your forehead will heal; your eye might not.*

- **It Went Very “Rung?”** While on a hunting trip, a Sailor was climbing his tree stand when he lost his footing and fell. He unsuccessfully tried to catch himself and caught his right leg on the stand's rung on the way down. At the hospital, he required 43 stitches in his right shin. —*This type of injury may seem like a “one-off,” but our database has plenty of examples that say otherwise. A 2023 International Hunters Education Association study found that nationally, 300-500 hunters are killed annually in tree stand accidents, while another 6,000 sustain injuries from tree stand falls. Adding a weapon and other gear raises the risk when climbing, so take it slow and maintain three points of contact.*

- **Flipped out.** A Sailor was riding a mountain bike down a gravel trail when the front wheel slipped, throwing him onto the ground while the bike flipped over him. He suffered a fractured elbow and abrasions to both hands and was placed on 25 days of light duty. —*Although mountain bikes have specialized tires for rougher terrain, they aren't perfect, and most treads won't help you in loose gravel. Riding at a safe speed for the terrain is the best way to stay out of the ER. And always wear that helmet.*

- **Thumbs Down.** A Sailor was on a camping trip and needed to chop some firewood. As the pieces of wood became smaller and smaller as he split them, they wouldn't stand on their own, so...he held them with his left hand (*Noooooo!*). As you may have already guessed, the Sailor misjudged one of his strokes and sliced into his left thumb with the hatchet. He applied pressure and then a tourniquet and headed to the ER. Fortunately, the hatchet missed his tendons and bones, but he needed nine stitches. —*There are better ways to split those thin pieces of wood than swinging a hatchet toward your hand, just ask the internet. Laying the small pieces on their side is one of a few methods shown by outdoor experts. The key idea is to treat edged tools like they're firearms: never point (swing) a hatchet toward anything you don't want to hit (chop).*

### Key Takeaways

This dispatch reminds us that safety hazards don't go away when the days of summer are gone. They just manifest in different activities. Here are a couple of thoughts to help stay safe this season:

1. **Don't chance it.** Before you head out for your favorite autumn adventure, take a minute to practice Risk Management as you do when you're on duty; it can save more than just your pride. Identify potential hazards (*i.e. look for what can hurt you*) and consider the risks and the consequences of making the wrong choice.

2. **Autumn responsibly.** We understand that a couple of hard ciders around the campfire may be part of enjoying your well-earned time off. Just do it responsibly. There's no need to get too wasted to enjoy the outdoors.

For more tips on how you can stay safe this fall, check out the Naval Safety Command's 2024 Fall and Winter Safety Awareness presentation on our public website in the “Off Duty” tab at:

<https://navalsafetycommand.navy.mil/>

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