



NAVAL SAFETY COMMAND SAFETY AWARENESS DISPATCH



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Swim-related Mishaps

The critical days of summer are upon us, which means a surge in water-related activities like swimming, canoeing, stand-up paddle boarding and more. As with any activity, there are risks that must be recognized and managed. Over the past three years, more than 200 swim-related incidents, both on and off duty, have been reported, underscoring the importance of risk awareness. Understanding your limits, identifying potential hazards and following essential water safety guidelines can be the difference between a carefree experience and a dangerous situation. Let's *dive* into a few real-life scenarios where things didn't go as planned and uncover key lessons to keep ourselves safe and our Navy/Marine Corps team ready.



- **Unplanned Deep Dive.** During the hot days of summer, a group of individuals frequented the pool, a mix of confident swimmers and those who struggled in the water. The less experienced swimmers often followed their friends to the deep end, clinging to the wall and blending into the crowd—*an occurrence that raised no concern...hmmm*. A handful of the seasoned swimmers were challenging themselves, diving to touch the bottom, then resurfacing. Among them was a Marine (M1), a weak swimmer who had been in class all day, skipped lunch and had not hydrated while at the pool for the last couple of hours. He had been holding onto the wall but lost his grip, silently sinking without thrashing. This occurred just as the recreational swim was ending, with the pool churning from the movement of people exiting. The turbulent water caused poor visibility and M1 (*on the bottom*) wasn't immediately noticed. As the water cleared, lifeguards spotted him and sprang into action, pulling him from the pool and administering CPR. Revived but coughing blood, he was rushed to the ER and later airlifted to a hospital for further treatment. —*A non-swimmer, with no calories, no hydration, in the deep end...what could go wrong? Thrashing for help would've caught the attention of the lifeguards sooner, but M1 was likely dehydrated and weak from skipping lunch. He knew of his swimming abilities and so did his friends, yet he was in the deep end unobserved. Thankfully he recovered and returned to full duty. Life lesson: Look at the risks before any task or activity and adjust accordingly (in this case, that would mean things like, Stay out of the deep end? Eat something? Make sure your buds know where you are? Etc.).*
- **Family Outing Turns Tragic.** While spending time at the beach with his family, a Sailor noticed his child was in distress while swimming in the ocean. He immediately swam out to help but was overwhelmed by the powerful tide. Emergency responders, including police and rescue personnel, arrived at the scene and retrieved the unresponsive man, but resuscitation efforts were unsuccessful. Meanwhile, the child was safely brought back to shore by the rescue team. —*Conditions can change unexpectedly when swimming at the beach due to factors such as weather, tides and currents. Swimming near a lifeguard—always a good idea—puts professional help nearby and decreases response time in an emergency.*
- **Shallow Water, Deep Consequence.** A Marine (M1) was at a pool with buddies. He dove headfirst into the pool, expecting a smooth entry. However, despite having some experience with competitive swimming, his head struck the pool floor, resulting in an immediate neck injury. His buddies first noticed M1 in distress when they saw him lying on the pool deck holding his neck. He claimed not to be severely injured but appeared to be in serious pain. He was taken in for medical treatment where it was determined his neck was broken. The maximum depth of the pool was four feet; he dove in where a shelf decreased the depth to two feet. According to the report, the pool area had signs posted, warning people not to dive in the shallow end of the pool. —*His competitive swim experience gave him over-confidence in his ability to safely dive into a shallow pool. Add in poor risk management and loss of situational awareness and you get serious injury. Please think critically and take a moment to apply risk management principles in normal life too, not just on the job. It can save you. And for the obvious lesson, if the sign says "No diving", then don't.*

Swim-related Mishaps

- **Plan for the Unexpected.** A Sailor was on a lake canoeing with a child. The child was wearing their life jacket, but the Sailor was not. The canoe overturned. The Sailor attempted to help the child to safety but was overcome by the water and drowned; the child made it to shore without incident. —*Whether you're a good swimmer or not, wearing a life jacket while boating mitigates risk for an unexpected incident. Please, wear a life jacket; it could've saved this Sailor...and it could save you.*
- **Outmaneuvered by the Pool Ladder.** During an underwater physical conditioning pool event for advanced swim students, one student ascended quickly and struck his head on the metal steps of the exit ladder upon surfacing. He suffered a large gash (yeesh!) on his scalp requiring a trip to the ER and numerous stitches to close the wound. The training didn't include wearing goggles or a mask, limiting visibility. —*Human error is rarely just about one bad choice, such as surfacing under the pool ladder, it's usually a symptom of other bigger conditions. You can help prevent mishaps by adopting a risk-aware mindset, being attuned to what could go wrong and taking steps to mitigate potential issues. In this case, leaders could have used several strategies such as assigning a safety monitor, installing padding on the ladder and requiring goggles during training. If you're just the swimmer, keep your eyes open and know what's above you before you surface.*
- **Surf Dive Goes Wrong.** A servicemember (P1) went to the beach with a friend (P2), swimming in the ocean for a few hours. They got out of the water for a break and moved their towels away from the rising tide. Anxious for more swimming, P1 got back in the water, diving into the surf. P2 saw P1 float to the surface face-down. Realizing something was wrong, P2 entered the water, turned P1 face-up and noticed what appeared to be a broken neck. P2 pulled him out of the water; he was conscious, able to speak, but couldn't move. P1 was airlifted to a hospital and required emergency surgery. He misjudged the depth of water in the surf, resulting in a collision with the ocean floor and permanent injuries. —*The ocean floor constantly shifts, with changing tides and crashing waves that can create a misleading sense of water depth. Take a moment to assess the risk before diving; doing that may have avoided this tragedy.*
- **Note to Self: Avoid Walking on Sea Urchins.** While swimming in the open ocean as part of his regular fitness routine, a Sailor began his way back to shore. However, the waves and currents channeled him toward a rocky shoreline, which was entirely covered in sea urchins. Without any foot protection, he had no choice but to traverse across the sharp, spiny rocks to reach solid ground. The sea urchins' spines punctured his feet, leaving them severely cut. Once back to the sandy beach where he began, he drove to the ER, received first aid and confirmed no urchin debris remained in his feet. —*Failing to stay aware of the changing environment during his swim resulted in significant pain for this Sailor and left his team a member short while he healed. Situational awareness and adaptability are essential, whether towing an aircraft or swimming in the ocean. Had he checked his position—a must when swimming in open water—or adjusted his route based on the current and waves, he might have avoided the rocks and spiny friends.*

Key Takeaways

Just as the decisions and actions you take while on the job influence readiness, the same holds true for the choices you make during your time off; both play a crucial role in your own well-being and our teams' readiness. Essential skills used on the job—like risk management and situational awareness—extend to your off-duty life too. They're not a program; they're a way of thinking.

1. Have a risk-aware mindset. Take time to stop and think through the activity, tune into what could go wrong (“*If I dive in, will I crack my skull on the bottom?*”) and reduce those risks by putting measures in place (*like #3 below*).

2. Always wear a life jacket when boating. This includes canoes, kayaks, paddleboards and the like, even if you're a great swimmer or don't intend on getting in the water.

3. Always test the water depth first. Never dive headfirst into the surf, shallow water or water that you can't see below the surface.

4. Swim near a lifeguard! Having professional help nearby is always a good idea. Pay attention to beach warning flags, as they indicate surf conditions and potential hazards.

Please visit our [101 Critical Days of Summer 2025](#) page for additional resources.

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