



Naval Safety Center

LESSONS LEARNED



19-18

KNIFE MISHAPS

"That's not a knife. That's a knife." – Crocodile Dundee

Knives don't usually come with safety warnings, and there isn't a personnel qualification standard (PQS) for the standard issue folding knife. Based on the 140 reported knife-related mishaps we've seen in the past year alone, there probably should be (those were on and off duty, Navy and Marine Corps). I know what you're asking: "What's your *point*?" It's simply this: knives can hurt you; and they deserve more respect (and perhaps a healthy dose of fear) than we give them. In each of these mishaps, the tool performed exactly as designed: it cut something and did it well. We don't need a causal factor pie chart because 100% of the mishaps were human error-related. Zero external factors.



This lesson is titled "Knife Mishaps," because nearly all cutting and stabbing mishaps reported in the past year involved folding, fixed-blade, or box cutter-type knives. We did not count tools such as saws, garden shears, axes, etc., because we found enough data on knives alone to warrant this special lessons learned category. Using a knife as the wrong tool topped the stats with 55% of mishaps, with cutting zip ties as the most common infraction, followed by trying to open hard plastic packaging. Another 20% occurred from mishandling, 10% from cutting food, and 15% miscellaneous. The combined impact on personnel readiness was 247 lost work days and 846 days light duty.

Chinese General Sun Tzu wrote, "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles." Well, the following examples demonstrate that sometimes the enemy **is yourself**. Each case provides a lesson in respecting the blade. So let's *cut* to the chase, shall we?

- Quoting from the report, "The service member was improperly using a steak knife to cut holes into a child's toy car when his hand slipped and lacerated his right pinky finger." Result: six days light duty, and difficulty typing the letter "P" on the keyboard. — *This one raises a couple of questions: Is there a "proper" way to use a steak knife to cut holes in a toy car? And, why are you cutting holes in your kid's car? We're not sure what the "proper" tool is in this case, but this toy car body repairman certainly ruled out steak knife.*

- A Sailor purchased a packaged part from the auto parts store. While using a pocket knife to open the seemingly impenetrable plastic package, the knife slipped, cutting his left hand and requiring four stitches. — *Honestly, we can identify with this unfortunate Sailor. There is even a term for it known as "Wrap Rage." As it turns out, there are special tools for opening those plastic vaults, pictured right.*



- A Marine lacerated a tendon in his hand [*Eesh!*] while attempting to open a wine bottle with a knife. This one takes the title for the most work days lost, with hand surgery, 27 days convalescent leave, and 30 days light duty. — *While a quick web search will reveal many ingenious life hacks for opening wine bottles, including using a knife, we recommend using a cork screw in the future...or consider switching to box wine. As for us, we'll stick to soda. It's safer on a number of levels.*

KNIFE MISHAPS

- A Marine was in a local superstore parking lot with his newly purchased tool. Eager to examine his new gadget, he attempted to cut off a zip tie with his knife when it slipped and cut his left index finger. He was treated and released the same day with several stitches, but no days of limited duty (Hoo-rah!) — *We're not sure what the "tool" was, but oh the irony if it was a pair of zip tie cutters. They actually do exist (pictured right)! For more information on zip tie cutting and other knife safety tips, check out the June 2019 edition of the Ship's Safety Bulletin on our CAC-enabled website.*



Zip Tie Cutters

- While in his barrack's room, a Sailor was rapidly switching his grip [playing] with his personal knife when things inevitably got out of control, and the knife got away from him. In an attempt to catch the knife while it was falling (cue a *Matrix Reloaded* slow motion fight scene) he grabbed the blade and lacerated his left palm, requiring nine stitches and eight days light duty. — *While hanging out in the room, please just stick to a less dangerous pastime like video gaming, and leave the knife juggling to the professionals.*



- We chose this one from three worthy candidates: oyster shucking, avocado cutting, and bagel slicing; all three ended with a knife to the hand. A Marine was shucking oysters when his knife slipped and cut into his hand. His visit to the hospital earned him one stitch in a tendon, nine stitches in his hand, and 20 days on light duty. — *There's just no graceful way to shuck an oyster, that's why there are special gloves for the task. In the oyster-shucking business, you just know up front it's going to be ugly.*

- A Marine was trying to fix a fellow Marine's smokeless tobacco device utilizing a small pocket knife. The device slipped from his hands and the Marine accidentally cut his hand between the thumb and index finger, requiring 4 stitches. — *And there you have it, another reason to quit all forms of tobacco. Even smokeless tobacco can be dangerous in more ways than one.*

- Sailor 1 reached for Sailor 2's knife, which was hanging from a lanyard around Sailor 2's neck (we know what you're thinking, and we have no idea either). Sailor 2, attempting a Mister Miyagi-style reflexive grab at Sailor 1's wrist, missed his mark. Sailor 1 had unsheathed the knife at that same moment, and Sailor 2 grabbed the exposed blade. The incident resulted in Sailor 2 receiving a deep cut on the right index finger and 4 days light duty. — *Maybe our Daniel-San shouldn't be wearing a fixed blade knife around his neck until he achieves green belt status. Better yet, scrap the whole knife necklace look altogether.*

Key Takeaways / Lessons Learned

1. Knives are not toys. A good rule of thumb is to treat them as you would a handgun: always point (cut) in a safe direction. Be aware of what you're cutting and what is behind it (cut away from your body). Treat your knife with respect; keep it folded or sheathed when not using it.
2. "Don't bring a knife to a gunfight." Using a knife instead of the proper tool, coupled with non-adherence to lesson 1, accounted for most of the cuts and stabs reported. While it is easy to just pull out the knife you already have on your person, taking the extra moment to grab the proper tool will be worth the time invested. Learn from the stitches and lost work days of those who have already found that *point* first-hand.
3. There's truth to the saying "It's the dull knives that cut you." Granted, if you're not careful with a knife, the sharpness won't matter. However, if you find yourself forcing the blade or sawing relentlessly with it, beware that eventually it will do its job and cut through the intended target...and keep going. Keep your blades sharp and, again, use them only for the purpose they are intended.

This product is posted on the NAVSAFECEN CAC-enabled website at <https://intelshare.intelink.gov/sites/navsafe>.

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