



# Naval Safety Center

## LESSONS LEARNED



LL 20-06

### OFF-DUTY FIREARMS MISHAPS (and a crossbow...)

#### "I ain't got time to bleed." - Jesse Ventura

If you are a regular reader of Naval Safety Center lessons learned, you know this is the fourth edition on this topic in the past two years. Fiscal Year 2019 wasn't the worst year we've had for our warfighters negligently shooting themselves (*and their friends, furniture, etc.*) off duty, BUT we're still hurting ourselves in ridiculous ways. From 2016-2018 our Sailors and Marines were negligently shooting themselves 300% more often off duty than on duty! In FY19, we've managed to drop to the "new, improved" ratio of 233% (21 off duty vs 9 on duty). Fewer emergency room visits is better, but it's hard to call that a "win." Our on-duty training about range discipline and safety still needs to go home with us. It's time to revisit the subject (*again*) to help ensure we stay safe.



There are always examples that show us how to get better. Here is a random sampling of some of the recent events from both sides of our Blue and Green family. If the involved victims could talk to you directly, I'm confident they'd want you to learn from their mistakes.

- While a Marine was visiting his friend in base housing, the friend wanted to show the Marine his new shotgun. After the friend went upstairs to get the gun, our Marine decided to follow him. The Marine had only gotten as far as the landing of the stairway, when his friend upstairs tried to clear the gun and, according to the report, "accidentally hit the wall," causing it to go off and shoot the Marine in his right arm. — *Major surgery, 17 days hospitalized, 21 days convalescent leave, and an ongoing recovery. Walls don't usually set off guns, so there may have been more to the story than the report described (like where was his trigger finger?).*

- A Marine was disassembling a handgun, but he "failed to release the magazine, which was loaded with ammunition" (*that's usually the first step*). When he pulled back the slide and released it, the weapon fired. He sent a 9mm hollow point round through his hand and (*as a bonus prize!*), shot his buddy in the thigh. — *Guns aren't supposed to fire when the slide moves, but lots of striker fired weapons have a really light trigger. As with the shotgun, we wonder where his trigger finger was. The hand-shooter spent one day in the hospital and more than a month of lost work and light duty. His buddy, with the leg wound, received 30 days of light duty, but no hospital time. Gotta love Marines. "It's just a flesh wound."*

- A Marine was visiting his friend when he started "playing with a BB gun that he did not know was loaded." The narrative states "he failed to properly inspect the BB gun and then pointed it at himself and pulled the trigger." (*Yes, you read that correctly*). He accidentally shot himself in the neck. — *A BB gun isn't technically a "firearm," but it is still a gun. Pretty much a failure across the board for weapons safety rules. Since he only lost one work day and is OK, we don't know whether to laugh, cry, or just shake our heads in shame.*

#### **Firearm Safety Rule #1: Treat every firearm as if it is loaded.**

**If you treat every gun like it is loaded, "not knowing" or "forgetting" doesn't hurt as much...because you always "know" it is loaded.**

- While at a civilian shooting range, a Sailor drew his weapon from a holster on his hip. It's a good thing this wasn't an old west shootout, because he somehow tangled his firearm in his shirt, and inadvertently shot himself in the hip (*Wyatt Earp would not have been impressed*). — *Loose shirt or not, his finger should have been nowhere near the trigger. Three days in the hospital, over a month of limited duty (LIMDU), and an embarrassing story to tell the grandkids one day when they ask, "How'd you get that scar, Grandpa?"*

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- While at home, a Sailor was attempting to clean his pistol. He removed the magazine, but as he tried to clear the weapon by locking the slide to the rear, he dropped the gun. While attempting to catch it with his left hand, he accidentally grabbed the trigger and shot himself through his left hand and left thigh. — *We don't grasp how he managed to pull the trigger with his left hand and shoot himself in the same hand, but everyone has talents. With 22 days in the hospital and a month of LIMDU, he had plenty of time to reflect on how not to do that again. We've seen chainsaw juggling before, but never firearms. We don't recommend you do either one.*

- The report says a Sailor was cleaning his personal firearm "when the firearm discharged a round into his leg." — *They make it sound like he had nothing to do with it. The gun just up and bit him! This is an example of too little detail in the reporting, but we can guess the rest. Why were we cleaning a loaded gun?*

- A Marine was clearing his loaded handgun to make it safe for travel. He held the firearm in his right hand and used his left hand to safe the weapon. Outside his vehicle, he pointed the weapon to the deck (*good*), removed the magazine (*good*), and placed it in the back seat. After setting down the magazine, he moved to clear the slide, passing his left hand in front of the muzzle (*bad*). Before his left hand touched the slide, he accidentally discharged the gun (*hmm...finger on trigger?*), injuring two fingers on his left hand. — *Following "some" of the firearm safety rules isn't the same as following all of them.*



**Firearm Safety Rule #2: Never point a loaded weapon (see #1) at anything you don't intend to shoot.**

***If you keep it pointed in a safe direction, even if you don't know or remember rules 3 and 4, nobody gets hurt (including you).***

- (*This isn't technically a "firearm," but...*) A Marine and her husband came downstairs in their home to find an opossum in her living room (*the rest of this is better if you play the old Dukes of Hazzard theme music in your head as you read; look it up if you're too young to remember*). They attempted to herd the opossum out of the house, but instead "it cornered itself and would not move." The Marine — being a Marine — determined the best course of action was to "kill the opossum with her personal crossbow" (*"Get some!"*). After they cleared the area around the opossum "the best they could," she loaded her crossbow with an arrow...took aim...and shot the opossum in the body. She loaded another arrow into the crossbow in case it was needed, but the critter passed on without the second shot (*"One shot, one kill"*). But, there was a problem. The only way to unload the crossbow was to fire it. So...she went outside to fire the weapon away from any persons or obstacles (*good*), pointed the crossbow toward the ground to shoot (*good*), misplaced her thumb leaving it in the path of the arrow (*"Danger, Will Robinson!"*), and fired. — *Two weeks of lost work, and two weeks of LIMDU. It may not go "Bang!", but if it shoots a projectile, the safety rules are the same. Uncle Jesse would have been disappointed.*

- (*Try to follow the bouncing ball here*). A Marine was preparing to disassemble his semi-automatic .40 caliber pistol. Before doing so, he cleared the weapon and handed it to his friend for review. Post review, the Marine noticed a spare magazine lying adjacent and assumed that was the magazine from the pistol. In reality, during back-and-forth show-and-tell, the friend had handed the loaded magazine back to the Marine, and the Marine had absent-mindedly put it back in the pistol. Seeing the other magazine lying nearby, he assumed the weapon was still unloaded. When he next moved to demonstrate how to disassemble the weapon (which requires the trigger to be pulled for disassembly), the Marine, not realizing he already inserted the loaded magazine and that the slide had been pulled to the rear, sent the slide home and pulled the trigger. Bang! As designed, it fired a round. He shot himself clean through the left thigh. — *His friend (who we presume greatly appreciated the entire, real-life demonstration of how guns work) was good enough to drive him to the nearest emergency room. Assumed it was empty (fail). Didn't keep it pointed in a safe direction (fail). Sigh.*

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Please learn from these painful lessons of others. It isn't just that we care about your life and limb (*and we do!*), it's also about operational readiness. The CNO recently stated that "Mission one for every Sailor...is the operational readiness of today's Navy," and that he is "counting on each of you to set a strong personal example of responsible behavior, both on and off duty." It's safe to say that goes for the Marine Corps too. If you accidentally shoot yourself (*or your buddy*), you definitely aren't operationally ready, and negligently handling weapons isn't responsible off-duty behavior.

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

### Lessons Learned

This part should sound very familiar if you read any previous versions of this lesson. These are not new lessons. They are the same ones people have re-learned since the invention of firearms. All of these incidents result from failing to follow the basic tenets of firearm safety. There are four main firearm safety rules, but we'll continue keeping it simple by focusing on just the top two (you can search the web for the rest of the list).

#### 1. Treat every firearm as if it is loaded.

This includes:

- ◆ A weapon you just unloaded (*or "think" you unloaded*).
- ◆ A weapon your buddy just handed you...or you just handed back to your buddy (*just read that one...again*).
- ◆ Even a weapon you just dismantled into four pieces and is sitting on the table!

#### 2. Never point a loaded weapon (see #1) at anything you don't intend to shoot.

This doesn't just mean "purposefully aiming" – it means "muzzle discipline". Don't ever let the muzzle cover anything you aren't willing to shoot, including (but not limited to):

- ◆ Any body parts you want to keep attached.
- ◆ Any friends you want to keep (*they will definitely be less friendly after you shoot them*).
- ◆ The thin wall of the room, on the other side of which you can't see who is there (*it has happened*).

**Following just these two basic rules would have avoided 98% of the off-duty firearm mishaps in the past three years!**

