



# Naval Safety Center

## LESSONS LEARNED



LL 20-28

### HUNTING MISHAPS

#### *“Man is in the forest.” — Bambi*

Humans have hunted game for a few thousand years (or a few million years, depending on your beliefs about the world's origins), but the hazards and lessons of hunting deer or woolly mammoths have yet to be learned for some of us. Sailors, Marines, civilian employees, and family members are part of the more than 15 million registered hunters in the U.S. and, unfortunately, are also part of the hunting-related injuries.



Flickr — Florida Fish and Wildlife

Surprisingly, topping the list of mishaps isn't firearms, but falls -- particularly tree stand falls. Recent estimates by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service show that roughly one-third of hunting accidents each year involve falls from tree stands, and our naval mishap data suggests the same. We also found many more ways to hurt yourself while hunting than most folks might imagine.

Nothing tells a story better than, well, a story. So, here are some short stories from our “Woodland Warriors” about what might bite you (*figuratively; animal attacks will be another LL*). Read and learn from their reported bad days in the wilderness so your hunting experience can be safe and injury-free.

♦ Cat-like reflexes. We shall quote from the actual report narrative: “It was a beautiful morning, partly sunny and pleasant, and the [Service Member (SVM)] was out in the woods...setting up what was to be his tree stand...As nature would have it, his tree stand didn't want him.” A misplaced foot, the report continues, “allowed room for mother gravity to lend a hand, snatching the SVM from the would-be tree stand and planting him on the ground 10 feet below. Just like a cat, he did manage to land on his feet.” But unlike a cat, he suffered a broken right ankle. He required surgery and several weeks of limited duty. — *Please use a safety harness and lifeline. Tree stand full-body harnesses (FBH) are widely available and not necessarily expensive. You can make your own lifeline with rope (web search the topic for directions). They are worth their weight in gold.*

♦ A seatbelt only works when you use it. While out hunting, a Sailor fell 18 feet (Yikes!) from a tree stand while trying to repair the upper part of the stand. He was wearing a harness, but... (*pardon us while we weep for a moment*) “he temporarily unhooked it in order to fix” the stand up in the tree. He and his safety harness both fell while making the repairs. He broke multiple ribs and dislocated his right shoulder. — *A disconnected harness is the same as no harness at all. And when you are trying to move around and fix something is when you need it connected the most! This scenario is where the lifeline option is critical. Our Sailor was lucky, as 25% of fatal falls happen from 10 feet or less.*

♦ Gallipoli revisited. Directly quoting from the report, “a Sailor sprained his ankle while climbing out of a tree stand onto a canoe.” — *Climbing up and down from a tree stand safely is already hard enough. If you choose to make it an amphibious landing and withdrawal, expect complications.\**

♦ Not an Amazing Wallenda. While hunting on leave, a Sailor was climbing into his tree stand. He lost his footing and tried to catch himself. He only caught himself partially, though. Specifically, his right leg caught the tree stand rung. It saved him from the fall, but he lacerated his right shin enough for 43 (yes, 43) stitches. — *Ensure you have a firm footing and grip, and never climb with anything in your hands or on your back. Use an equipment rope/string to pull up your firearm/bow/gear (see photo on page 3). And an inexpensive lifeline and safety harness can save your life...and your leg.*

*\*If you aren't familiar with the Gallipoli campaign in WWI, it's worth a web search. You get both a history and a safety lesson!*

## HUNTING MISHAPS

**Twenty-five percent of all fatal falls occur from 10 feet or less.**

♦ Age does not necessarily bring wisdom. A very senior Sailor was setting up his tree stand. When his tree stand strap broke, his safety harness didn't catch him (*because he didn't have one*). He fell 16-18 feet to the ground, broke both his tibia and fibula (*both bones in his lower leg*) and received compression fractures to his lumbar vertebrae. — *The report doesn't say who carried him out of the woods. We are thankful he survived. Please get and use a safety harness and lifeline.*

♦ Shrubbery – 1. Marine – 0. The short narrative says it best: While hunting, a Marine “tripped on a bush and stabbed himself.” He was tracking a deer. He was carrying a knife, became entangled in a thorn bush, and slipped. The knife lacerated his right hand just above the wrist on the thumb pad. Thankfully, he had a hunting buddy who drove him to the local hospital for stitches. — *Unless you plan to engage in hand-to-hand combat with the deer when you find him, keep the knife sheathed till then.*

♦ A slice of life. A Sailor was hunting with his wife when she shot a deer. He decided to dispatch it by cutting its throat with a knife (*Why?*), but he failed to notice that the folding blade was not locked. When he attempted to cut the deer, the knife folded and cut through the tendon between his thumb and index finger (*Ewww!*). — *Unless you're concerned the zombies will find you, the noise of a second shot from a safe distance is a better option. When it is time for a knife, make sure your blade is locked.*

♦ How about another slice? After a successful day of hunting, a Marine was at the game dressing area skinning a deer. According to the report, “SNM's knife unlocked and shut, lacerating the right index finger.” His buddy drove him to the emergency room (ER) for stitches, antibiotics, and 14 days on light duty. — *We won't repeat ourselves about locking the blade. We have many more examples like these, but two should be enough to drive home the knife point (pun intended. sorry).*

♦ Revenge of the mannequins. A Sailor was on leave, shopping at a popular outdoor equipment store when, the report says, he was “struck in the face by a hunting display.” (🤔 *Confused emoji*). It seems that, “while interacting with a skeet-shooting display, the equipment inadvertently released and hit him in the face.” The impact caused facial lacerations. According to the report, the doctors at the local emergency room “glued” his skin back together. — *Since he was on leave, he didn't accumulate lost work days, but that didn't make his wounds or his pride hurt any less. He never even made it to the woods. Not everyone should take up hunting as a hobby (we're just sayin').*

♦ Wile E. Coyote finally wins. This mishap is a case study of what not to do. At about 1830, a Sailor and his roommate went out with friends “for a night of casual drinking.” After stops at multiple drinking locations,” (*i.e., they were well intoxicated*), the two of them went home around 0100. No major problems so far, but... at 0230, they had the bright idea to go coyote hunting (🤦 *Facepalm. SMH*).

Neither of them saw flaws in that plan (*probably because of their collective alcohol levels*), so they took a rifle and a .45 caliber pistol and drove (*Seriously, Bro!?*) to some county land seeking their prey. The danger twins arrived at the hunting grounds around 0345. The coyotes had nothing to fear, however (*except perhaps being hit by an impaired driver*).

Upon exiting the vehicle, the inebriated Sailor loaded the pistol by inserting the magazine and releasing the slide. The slide didn't fully seat, so he tried to clear it by grasping the top of the slide with his left hand while holding the pistol grip with his right hand. “The weapon discharged,” shooting off two-thirds of his left little finger (*we are curious where his trigger finger was when it went off*). His roommate drove him (*again*) to the ER. “Stubby the Kid” had a Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) of 0.17. The ER didn't take blood from the roommate, but he likely wasn't much better off. — *These two individuals were walking hazards! They did almost everything wrong! We are thankful they didn't kill themselves or someone else. Be responsible. Don't drink and drive...or hunt, or handle firearms, or otherwise be that idiotic! We are usually much more compassionate than to say such harsh things, but this example of poor judgment is bordering on legendary. Please be wise and careful out there.*

## HUNTING MISHAPS

**Editor's Note:** Interestingly, according to the WESS/RMI report archives, only Sailors fall out of trees. We're skeptical that zero Marines have fallen out of a tree stand in the last decade. More likely, it just wasn't reported. Marines are good about reporting when they stab themselves while cleaning a deer, though.

### Lessons Learned / Key Takeaways

Hunting is a great way to enjoy the outdoors, spend quality time with friends or family and maybe even put some choice meat in the freezer. Make your hunting adventures comfortable and safe by exercising Risk Management and preparing yourself. Here are a few tips that can save the day, and maybe even your life.

**1. Don't hunt alone.** And even if you aren't alone, before you head out the door, have a plan and leave it with someone with the times and places you will be hunting and when you'll return. That way, they can follow up if you fail to come back on time. To misuse an old saying, "If you fall out of a tree stand, but nobody else is around to hear it...does it make a sound?"

**2. The four rules of gun safety always apply, even when no one is watching.** #1) Always treat the gun as if it is loaded. #2) Don't point the gun at anything you are not willing to destroy. #3) Keep your finger off the trigger until your sights are on target and you have made the decision to shoot. #4) Be sure of your target and what is behind it.

**3. Gravity works in the woods too.** Tree stands are an excellent tool for increasing your line of sight, but they also increase risk if not used properly. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) website has some great tree stand safety tips. Here's one: Wear a full-body harness (FBH) and know how to use it. See more tips at <https://www.fws.gov>.

**4. Inspect and Practice.** Inspect your stand before the hunting season, and if it's new, practice at ground level with your FBH before you climb. Select a healthy, proper-sized tree. For more tips, see the FWS website. There are also a few Apps for tree stand safety, go figure.

**5. Items to bring with you.** A serious first aid kit, not just a couple of band-aids and some antiseptic. With guns, bows, and knives involved, the potential for severe wounds is greater. Pack sizeable bandages, a tourniquet, scissors, quick clot, and other major wound dressings, and know how to use them. Add in a cell phone, whistle, flashlight, rain gear, and snacks (*don't forget snacks*).

**5. Final fill-in-the-blank quiz:** Don't drink and \_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_.



- a. Drive.
- b. Handle Firearms.
- c. Wander through the brush.
- d. Try to find wild animals.
- e. Climb a tree with a knife.
- f. All of the Above.

This product is posted on the NAVSAFECEN CAC-enabled website  
<https://intelshare.intelink.gov/sites/nsc/Pages/default.aspx>,

and on the public website  
<https://navalsafetycenter.navy.mil/Safety-Promotions/Lessons-Learned>.



**Happy (and safe) hunting!**

*And remember, let's be careful out there...*