



Naval Safety Center

LESSONS LEARNED



LL 21-10



OFF-DUTY FIREARMS MISHAPS (Episode V)

"I have a very strict gun control policy: if there's a gun around, I want to be in control of it."
— Clint Eastwood

Loyal readers, we regret to publish this — yet another — lesson learned for off-duty firearms mishaps. After four previous editions in three years, too many of our off-duty warfighters still seem intent on negligently shooting themselves (*and their roommates, friends, cars, furniture, etc.*). In previous editions (*look 'em up on the NAVSAFECEN websites*), we noted the ridiculously high percentages (200-300%) of off-duty vs. on-duty mishaps, but after reading the volumes of new examples, we'll just skip the figures. To paraphrase an old quote, "One death is a tragedy. A million deaths is a statistic." We don't care about the numbers. We care about you. On-duty training, range discipline, and basic firearm safety rules still aren't carrying home for all of us. It's time to revisit the subject (*again...*) to help us all stay safe.

Disappointingly, there were far more example narratives than we could include in this lesson. Please make it harder for us to find examples. We challenge you to put us out of business! We'll gladly find another job if you'll keep yourselves and your friends out of the firearm-mishap database.

- Add a pickup truck and an ex-girlfriend, and this has the makings of a country-music hit. A Marine was loading his shotgun with birdshot at his home so he could "scare off a large bird in his yard digging up the grave of his deceased dog." While he was still inside the house, the report states, "he had a negligent discharge" that resulted in him shooting himself in the right foot near his big toe. A quick trip to the Emergency Room (ER) showed there was no loss of bone. He received 14 days of convalescent leave. — *We genuinely feel bad for the Marine's loss of his dog (we've been there ourselves). At the same time, let's all learn that it'd be better to just chase the bird off with something less dangerous. The report didn't say whether the bird was scared or not.*

- Sorry, Mom, I forgot. According to the report, a Marine was disassembling his mother's handgun, "unaware that there was a round in the chamber." As you might imagine, the gun went off, injuring his hand. — *A textbook example of why we always treat firearms like they are loaded. If we do, being "unaware" of that bullet in the chamber becomes much less dangerous.*

- I forgot too. One fine Navy morning, an officer was cleaning his firearm. According to the report, he carried the weapon regularly with a concealed carry license. Having carried the weapon a few days prior, he "had forgotten that he had a round loaded into the chamber" (*see the previous example*). Now, this handgun model requires an operator to pull the trigger to disassemble it. The officer removed the magazine (*spoiler alert: he skipped a step here*) and then pulled the trigger to continue disassembly. The gun operated precisely as designed, firing the round that he forgot about ... right through his left hand. He went immediately to the nearest ER, receiving surgery and an unlisted period of light duty. — *Treat all guns like they're loaded (even if you think they're not). Don't point them at anything you don't want to shoot (including your hand).*

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.

- COVID is dangerous in all kinds of ways. A Sailor was sick-in-quarters (SIQ) because of possible COVID symptoms. While isolating and recuperating, according to the report, "after consuming an unknown quantity of alcohol," and arguing with his significant other, the Sailor decided to go sleep in his car. In the wee hours of the morning, the spouse heard a gunshot and went to check on him. She found him with a self-inflicted gunshot wound to his right ring finger. He underwent surgery, but the doctors had to amputate the finger. — *If you are at home sick, just rest and drink lots of water (not alcohol). The alcohol likely contributed to the argument and the poor weapons discipline, and didn't help his COVID recovery. Why do we need to keep repeating that alcohol and guns don't mix?*

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- It's [not] the thought that counts. A Sailor was riding in a friend's car one evening and discovered a loaded semi-automatic handgun in the glove compartment. He felt uncomfortable riding around with a loaded gun right in front of him (*we can respect that*), so he attempted to remove the magazine and eject the round from the chamber (*good plan; he remembered both steps*). According to the report, when he tried to execute this good plan, however, his "finger swept into the trigger well," and the gun did what it was designed to do (*Bang!*). Regretfully, he shot more than just the floorboard. The round went through his calf first. The Sailor "was driven to a civilian hospital" (*presumably by the same friend*) and "treated for mild/moderate bleeding" (*you don't say*). — *We praise the excellent intentions of this would-be firearms safety advocate. But his execution was lacking. Please learn from his lesson. Keep your finger clear of the trigger, and keep the weapon pointed in a safe direction.*

- There is no good title for this tragedy. A Sailor was sitting on his couch at his home. That sounds safe enough, right? His roommate was cleaning a semi-automatic handgun on the other side of the room. While the roommate was "manipulating the weapon," according to the report, "a round went off and struck the Sailor in the chest." The Sailor was killed. — *Firearms are no joking matter. Irresponsible weapon handling and failing to follow the basic safety rules can lead to more than just pain and lost work time. We beg you ... please learn from this.*

- I'm not distracted; I'm multitasking. One weekend afternoon, a Sailor decided to clean and prepare his semi-automatic firearm. He removed the magazine (*good*) and proceeded to eject the round from the chamber (*also good*), but the bullet stuck in the chamber on his first try to eject it. The report says, "With a phone in the Sailor's left hand playing music," (*not good*) he sat in a chair on the back patio and "placed the firearm handle between his thighs" (*horrifyingly bad!!!*) while trying several times to eject the round in the chamber (*SMH*). While attempting to eject the bullet, the gun went off, hitting the Sailor's phone and his left hand. The report states that the Sailor "called a friend" who took him to the hospital. — *The report doesn't say if he called his friend with the same bullet-struck phone, but if he did, we need whatever screen protector he was using. The Sailor can consider himself lucky that his phone and hand were the only casualties. We don't think we really have to say it, but we will anyway: "Between your thighs" is not a safe direction for weapon pointing. And trying to unload a handgun one-handed because you don't want to put down the music is just crying out for a trip to the ER. Please remember this one and learn from it vicariously.*

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 remember rules 3 and 4, nobody gets hurt.

- Grandpa, why do you always set off the airport metal detectors? A guest at a Sailor's house had purchased a new belly-band holster and was practicing drawing from it. The guest gunfighter dropped the loaded pistol while practicing, and the pistol fired when it hit the deck. According to the report, the "round ricocheted off [the] floor, went through a wall and into the bathroom," where the Sailor was minding his own business ... using the facilities. To his great and sudden surprise, the Sailor was struck in the rear of his left thigh, and the round lodged inside. As expected, he was off to the hospital. Medical personnel eventually chose to leave the round in his leg, judging that removing it risked more harm to him than leaving it. — *The report wording sums it up perfectly: "Playing with a loaded weapon was a Causal Factor." If you're going to practice your quick draw, unload the weapon first, Cowboy. We wonder if that guest gets invited over anymore.*

- It's not loaded. Two Sailors went shooting at the range together. After returning home, they consumed a "few" beers (*the amount is unclear, but the police report says it was enough to visibly be impaired*). While home, Sailor 1 was on a video call showing someone else his new gun. While doing so, his gun went off (*Why was it loaded!!!???*), shooting Sailor 2 in the face as he walked by. The bullet fractured Sailor 2's jaw and caused soft-tissue damage to his face and neck. Sailor 1 called 911 and rendered first aid. Paramedics whisked the victim to the hospital for treatment and surgery. Thankfully, he survived. According to the report, Sailor 1 had "visually inspected the firearm at the range ... and didn't notice a round in the chamber." — *"Didn't notice" is precisely why we always treat a weapon like it's loaded! This mishap was completely avoidable, just by following the basics of firearm safety. Alcohol was a factor (again).*



RANGE SAFETY

All guns are always loaded. Even this one.

Key Takeaways / Lessons Learned

These are not new lessons, but they seem to be for some of us. All of these incidents result from failing to follow the basics of firearm safety. There are four main firearm safety rules, but we'll continue to keep it simple by only focusing on the top two rules (*search the web for the rest of the list*), plus a bonus "Don't drink and..." addendum.

1. Treat every firearm as if it is loaded. This rule includes:

- ◆ A weapon you just unloaded (*or "think" you unloaded*).
- ◆ A weapon your buddy left on the bed.
- ◆ Even a weapon you just dismantled (*you get the idea*).

2. Never point a loaded weapon (see #1) at anything you don't intend to shoot. This rule means "muzzle discipline." Don't ever let the muzzle cover anything you aren't willing to shoot, including:

- ◆ Any body parts you want to keep.
- ◆ Any friends you want to keep (*they will definitely be less friendly after you shoot them*).
- ◆ The ceiling when someone is on the second floor.

3. Don't drink and handle guns. #3 is not one of the "big four" firearm rules, because it should be obvious! It's disappointing that we have to include this in our "Don't drink and..." list (*which is getting far too long*). Consider for a moment: If there is a legal limit to drive a car, how much sense does it make to drink that much (*and more*) and then handle a gun? Please don't mix alcohol and guns. Nothing good will come from it.



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