



NAVAL SAFETY COMMAND

SAFETY AWARENESS DISPATCH



SA 22-27

Off-Duty Firearm Mishaps (Episode VII)

It is time for us to, yet again, raise the topic of off-duty firearm safety. We keep returning to this subject because our Marines and Sailors are still accidentally shooting themselves or their friends and family. We are pleased to say there were fewer reports of firearms mishaps in fiscal year 2022, but any number of mishaps is too many. Firearms safety is simple and should be second nature. Yet the service members in the following narratives did not live up to the standard. Here's hoping our gun enthusiasts read and learn from the mistakes of their service brethren.

- **Wannabe Gunslinger.** Our first case study comes from a Marine who took extreme measures to prove guns are not toys. This Marine decided to go for a walk on the beach at 0200 (*you know, that particular time when the most shenanigans happen*). As he was enjoying his moonlit stroll, he started "tombstoning" his pistol (*spinning it on his finger like he was in an old western*). He quickly learned that putting one's finger in the trigger well can cause the gun to fire (*like it is supposed to*) when the pistol discharged into his chest. Authorities found him (*the report doesn't say how*) and he was later diagnosed with a collapsed lung.
— *We jest a little here, but in all seriousness, this Marine almost killed himself. Guns are designed to kill; they should never be fooled around with. Leave the movie-style gun tricks in the movies.*
- **Sibling Rivalry Gone Awry.** A Marine was visiting family during a holiday leave period. He was sitting on his brother's bed when his brother decided to show off his new pistol. The brother retrieved the gun from the dresser and cleared the weapon. His finger was on the trigger, though, and he discharged a round into the visiting brother's leg (*one heck of a welcome home gesture*). — *You don't have to be in the military to follow proper weapons handling procedures. We all likely have friends and family that own firearms. Demand they follow the same safety procedures that you do. Say something if they are doing it wrong.*
- **A Poor Gamble.** A Sailor was spending the day hanging out with friends. At 2300 they were getting ready to go to the casino. The Sailor was going to lock his pistol in his vehicle for the night, so he sat in the passenger seat to unload and stow it in the glove compartment. He ejected the round from the chamber, but neglected to remove the magazine first (*a common misstep*). He pointed the weapon down and attempted to dry fire it, but since he didn't remove the magazine, another round chambered and he shot himself in the foot. — *This Sailor bet his safety on the weapon being empty...and lost. We have weapons handling procedures for a reason. You always do a visual and tactile check to ensure the chamber is empty; don't just go through the motions of ejecting a round and assuming the weapon is empty. Safety tip: dry firing the weapon is unnecessary to show that it is clear, and it could damage rimfire-type weapons. Some people may disagree, but there is no benefit. If you must dry fire, treat the weapon as if it is loaded and point it in a safe direction.*
- **There's a snake in my boot...I mean, holster.** This mishap is the first animal-triggered (*pun intended*) negligent discharge we have seen in our records. A Marine was at a friend's house and had his pistol in a waistband holster. His friend asked him to watch his five-foot ball python while he went to the store. The Marine draped the snake around his neck as his friend left. Ten minutes later, he noticed the snake's tail starting to weave around his pistol. He stood up and attempted to dislodge the snake, placing his right hand on the weapon and using his left to uncoil the tail. During the process, he unintentionally put his wrist in front of the barrel. At that moment, the snake struck, not with a bite, but by somehow pulling the trigger



* Local Area Assessments are completed by multidisciplinary teams focused on day-to-day unit level standards and compliance. The teams visit multiple units including ships, submarines air stations and facilities in a given fleet concentration area.

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and shooting the Marine through the wrist. — *The craziest part of this story is the Marine's friend had to convince him to go to the hospital. Maybe he did not want to tell people a snake shot him. We cannot speak for any deliberate malicious intentions on the snake's part. Perhaps it didn't like the Marine, but we can advise against handling unpredictable animals while carrying a firearm. Yes, this was a crazy story, but it demonstrates that the strangest things can happen when carrying a firearm. It's best to reduce those chances as much as possible.*

- **Another Snake Story...Seriously?** At least the snake didn't pull the trigger in this case. A friend called a Sailor at 2300 to help retrieve horses that had escaped. The Sailor got a flashlight and placed his pistol in his waistband. *The report stated he did not use a holster (apparently, he was attempting to emulate an action movie character, but we digress).* While retrieving the horses, the Sailor noticed a snake moving toward him. He took out the pistol and shot the snake — *but not before shooting himself first as he tried to draw from his super-effective fire arm-storing waistband.* Please excuse the hint of sarcastic disdain in that sentence. *We're sure that when we were children, we all thought the movies where the character stuffs a pistol in their waistband were just the coolest. However, as military-trained adults, we must recognize the foolishness of that action. Please use carriers designed for firearms storage.*
- **Weapons Cleaning.** There are a few of these mishaps added to our database each year. A service member decided to clean his firearm. He released the magazine and began to pull the slide to the rear to release the chambered round. His hand slipped causing the slide to slip forward and the pistol to fire the chambered round. Because he was not orienting the weapon safely, the round fired through his left wrist and exited his forearm. — *Gun maintenance is essential to gun ownership, but gun safety measures still apply during this procedure. Had this service member kept the pistol oriented in a safe direction while he was unloading, he would have saved a trip to the hospital.*

Key Takeaways

Our key takeaways for firearm safety are always the same, but we will keep banging this drum because the people in these scenarios did not heed them. If they had adhered to these simple weapons safety rules, they would not have shot themselves or others.

1. **Treat every weapon as if it is loaded.** This rule applies to weapons in any physical state including a weapon that you just fired all the rounds from the magazine; a weapon you just cleared; a weapon you just completely disassembled. They should all be treated as if they are ready to fire.
2. **Never point a weapon at anything you don't intend to shoot.** Maintain muzzle awareness and discipline and ensure the weapon it is always oriented away from body parts, bystanders, and any direction that might be unsafe.
3. **Keep your finger straight and off the trigger until you are ready to fire.** Whether you are unholstering, clearing or any other handling, this rule must become muscle memory. If someone shoots themselves while unholstering their weapon, then their finger moved to the trigger too early.
4. **Keep your weapon on safe until you intend to fire.** This rule must also be committed to muscle memory. If your gun has a safety, which almost all do now, it should be engaged until you intend to fire. The mechanical barrier that protects us if we break one of the previous three rules in our human error. If your gun has an internal safety, then your safety is following rule #3.

We also feel the need to throw in the "don't drink and handle guns" rule. This rule should be common sense, but it gets commonly broken. Alcohol does nothing to improve our firearms handling abilities. It only hinders them. Please be smart and don't mix alcohol and guns.

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