



# Naval Safety Command

## SAFETY AWARENESS DISPATCH



SA 22-17

### STAIR-RELATED MISHAPS

♪ *And she's buying a stairway to heaven...* ♪ – Led Zeppelin

Stairs are a normal part of our daily lives, and most of us don't usually view them as a substantial hazard (*like traffic or train crossings*). Since they are so typical, it's easy to get complacent — and from a quick look in the mishap database, complacency has been taking a toll on the naval force.

A 23-year study of data from the National Electronic Injury Surveillance System found that 24,760,843 people were treated in U.S. emergency rooms for stair-related mishaps — that's more than a million people a year! Regretfully, we seem to be doing our part to fill a percentage of those stats. The next time you head up or down a set of stairs, please remember some of these Sailors and Marines who nearly took the “stairway to heaven.”

- Tarzan hungry. When a Marine was dismissed from formation for chow at 1100, he evidently was hungry, because he ran up the barracks stairs. Running on the stairs wasn't the best choice (it never is), because he slipped and, quoting from the report, “his face then struck the ground.” Someone escorted him to medical, receiving 10 stitches to sew up his lacerated eyebrow. — *The summary was written like Tarzan would have said it in the old black-and-white movies: “Marine should not run up stairs. Marine should assess every situation with safety in mind.” We are deeply thankful our hungry Marine didn't receive a concussion or fractured skull. Every scar has a story. This scar tells the story of being in a rush for a cheeseburger. Fast food is fine, but fast stairs to get food isn't. Please walk on the stairs.*

- Sometimes bad things happen to good people. The subject named Marine (SNM) was walking up stairs when he tripped and fell down, directly on his chin. He was taken to medical, who stitched up the gash he received. — *The report points out, “SNM is a good Marine who was simply walking up stairs and tripped.” He misjudged the distance between two steps, but had no contributing factors such as fatigue or intoxication. SNM just needed to look more carefully at the steps. That's a lesson for all of us, every day.*

- Here's one you don't hear every day. One pleasant evening around 2100, a Sailor was walking down the stairs at the barracks. According to the report, the Sailor “was distracted by the person playing a ukulele and missed a step...falling and twisting his right ankle.” He limped back to the room and reported for duty the next day. He was still in pain, so he went to the naval hospital. X-rays revealed three fractures in the left ankle (*yes, left*). As of the report date, 14 days restricted duty with a follow-up appointment that may lead to more. — *We wonder if a banjo would've had the same effect? I suppose it depends on what “kind of music just soothes [your] soul” (name that song). We don't know if the “right” vs. “left” ankle injuries were a typo or if he injured both ankles. Either answer is plausible. Regardless, the lesson for us all is stairs are unforgiving for distractions. Keep a hand on the rail, and your eyes and brain focused on where you are going.*

- “Hey, let's do ‘Get Help” (Thor: Ragnarok) One fine morning, a Marine decided to move a dresser from an upstairs bedroom to their garage. Being a strong, confident fellow, he decided he could move it by himself. The report lists a minute-by-minute timeline: 0814 - He started to descend the stairs while bear-hugging the dresser. 0815 - He leaned against the banister on the stairwell to try to get a better grip. As he did, the banister broke, exposing a metal rod that punctured his right thigh.



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0816 – His wife transported him to the ER, where he received 21 stitches and was discharged from the ER at around 1000. — *Simple lesson: Get help. The Marine should have recruited assistance to move a large item down the stairs. Confidence is good. Overconfidence gets you to the ER.*

• “It’s not the most right I’ve ever been.” (Paul Buchman). We’ll put ourselves on report with this one. A NAVSAFECOM staff member decided to move their little-used elliptical machine downstairs for a neighborhood yard sale. He wisely decided it was too heavy (150+lb) and ungainly for him to take it downstairs alone. Using some risk management, he asked his two adult kids to help. The trio safely wrangled the machine out of the guest room and to the stairs. They paused at the top to rest and brief who would do what during the descent – one kid on top holding the rear; one on the side balancing; dad on the bottom carrying the heavy end (*good dad, don’t put the kids under the monstrosity*). Halfway down the stairs, they discovered a new problem – the machine’s vertical arms were just a little too tall to fit between the stairs and the ceiling above. Instead of backing up to the top to regroup, Dad came up with a geometric solution on the fly: go back up two steps, tip the machine forward to fit the arms through the available gap, then move the machine further down where they could turn it upright (*sounds good, right?*). When they tilted the machine forward, the plan went sideways (*actually, upside down*). The staff member failed to note that the very heavy elliptical pedals/bars were held on their rolling tracks only by gravity – so when they tipped the machine vertically, the steel bar came forward and down (*Bam!*) onto his head. The staffer noted that he “felt a jarring impact, saw stars, then saw blood draining onto the steps.” Both kids held fast to the heavy load; Kid #2 observed the blood and [wisely] told the other to call 911. Dad got past the initial mental fog from the impact and pointed out that they had to get the heavy machine to the bottom of the stairs before anyone could do anything. So, they lifted together, moved the machine past the chokepoint, tilted it (*carefully*) back right-side-up, and got it safely to the bottom of the stairs. The kids provided first aid (*and called Mom; always the first required report*). It was a nasty gash, but ultimately did not require stitches or an ER visit. A little harder impact could easily have led to a skull fracture or concussion. — *This story presents multiple lessons: a. Definitely get help. Despite the apparent risk management failures, the RM success of having good help prevented worse harm. b. Measuring the height of the stairs would’ve been smart, so they could have mitigated that risk before moving. c. Disassembling the machine to move it may have been a pain, but it would’ve been less painful than the head injury.*

### Key Takeaways

Stairs are simple devices, so the takeaways are too. Please remember and follow these tips.

1. **Walk, don’t run.** We only listed one of those narratives, but running up or down stairs has taken out a long list of Sailors and Marines. Running will only save you a couple of seconds, and in the cases we’ve seen, it may actually keep you from ever getting where you were going (after you fall and injure yourself, you usually miss the event you were rushing to).
2. **Use the handrail.** If the stairs have a handrail, use it. If you’ve only got one operating hand, use that rail. If there is no rail, know your risk just went up and walk accordingly.
3. **Get help.** If you are moving something large or heavy...enough said.
4. **Look for slick conditions.** Whether it’s rain, condensation, ice, or the coffee that some “shipmate” spilled and didn’t clean up, a little moisture adds new risk factors. Pay more attention when the weather isn’t warm and dry.
5. **Look where you’re going.** Stairs aren’t a good place to multitask. Looking at your phone or over-focusing on a ukulele will take you down. Keep your eyes and brain aimed where your feet are going.

*And remember, “Let’s be careful out there”*