



NAVAL SAFETY COMMAND

SAFETY AWARENESS DISPATCH



SA 23-31

Shipboard Ladder Mishaps IV

"Luckily my neck broke my fall." — Joe Dirt

It's time to revisit a topic that's been injuring our Sailors and Marines since circa 1797: Shipboard Ladders. You can't get anywhere on a ship without them, and they can be a challenge to navigate safely. Historical stats show that shipboard ladder mishaps lead to more lost workdays than any other type of afloat mishap. Last year, based on our unofficial divisional count, there were more than 300 afloat ladder-related mishaps, which is about the average annual number.

We (in the Safety Awareness division) have had our share of close calls on shipboard ladders in our time, so we can relate. As we write these narratives of where things went badly, we aren't laughing at the pain of our fellow naval warriors (*well, maybe the occasional chuckle at the situation—and a cringe at the injury*). Whether you laugh, cry or cringe at the stories, we hope you'll remember them the next time you start up or down a ladderwell. As we often say here, "It's better to *read* and learn, than to *bleed* and learn."



- What Goes Up, Must Come Down. A Sailor tried to carry two empty five-gallon fuel cans to a storage location two decks below. On the way down the first ladder, with a can in each hand (*no hands on rails*), he misplaced the first step, overextending his heel on the front edge and slipping forward—then things happened fast! 1) As he slipped, he threw the fuel cans up and sideways so he could grab the railing. 2) He wasn't able to grab the rail, however, and fell backward and down the ladder, scraping his back. 3) During his descent, one of the two airborne fuel containers came back down on his head, creating a one-inch gash. 4) The Sailor then continued the rest of the way down the 10-foot ladder. After the dust settled and the initial shock subsided, he collected himself and the fuel cans and successfully descended another ladder to arrive at his destination. When he got there, he noted his head was bleeding and informed his supervisor. The supervisor noted the Sailor was "acting peculiar" and that his "personality was different." The supervisor assisted in escorting him to ship's medical. Medical staff determined the laceration didn't need sutures and his back wounds were superficial. During 24 hours of sick in quarters (SIQ), however, he began having memory problems and couldn't remember the preceding hours, including the mishap. He was taken back to medical for further evaluation and monitoring. —*Going up or down a ladder with items in both hands is tempting fate. It's just a matter of time before you fall. Two slower trips on the ladder are better than one fast trip to medical and a killer headache.*

- The Three Stooges Go to Sea. Three Sailors were working to move a cabinet up a ladderwell. Sailor #1 (*we shall call him "Curly"*) was lifting the cabinet himself. Two other supporting Sailors ("*Larry*" and "*Moe*") were holding the hatch in the up position. The hatch at the top was initially closed because the ship was in modified condition Zebra. Larry and Moe opened the hatch and leaned its support stanchions with the safety chains against the bulkhead, because they knew they'd be in the way of Curly trying to maneuver the cabinet around the stanchions. As Curly was climbing the ladder, the stanchions slid off the bulkhead and ... fell down the ladderwell. One of the stanchions hit Curly right on the forehead, causing a laceration. Impressively, he was able to finish getting the cabinet up the ladder and placed it on the deck at the top before reporting to ship's medical for evaluation. The medical team cleaned and bandaged his head wound and cleared him for duty. —*The report says plainly that the trio "propped the stanchions up against the bulkhead" instead of putting them in the stanchion stowage bracket where they would have been held safely in place.* Please learn from their mistake.

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- “Gee Grandpa, How’d You Get That Scar?” A Sailor was unloading food stores when a box fell down a ladderwell and, the report states (*we can’t make this stuff up*), “a frozen meat log ejected from the box and hit [him] in the head.” The report adds a statement of the obvious that it caused “immediate pain.” —*The report’s conclusions are a bit lacking, with a sole causal factor of “the servicemember being hit in the head with a frozen meat log.” Look a bit deeper for causes and mitigations, like ensuring the boxes are securely closed before passing them down, and stay alert if you’re the one at the bottom of the ladderwell. Whether it’s a meat log, frozen poultry, canned goods, a radio, wrench or canteloupe (we’ve seen ‘em all), it hurts.*
- I Don’t Gotta Go to The Bathroom No More. One fine afternoon, a report said, “A Marine was in a rush to use the bathroom on the ship’s 05 level” (*yes, they said bathroom and not “head”*). In his rush, he used the first step of the ladder and skipped the second and third steps, using both hands on the handrail to propel himself “upward and forward” to the fourth step. In the midst of his vaulting upward, he drove his head into the overhead handle on the ladder deck frame above and behind him. After the impact, the report says the Marine “noticed an excess amount of blood coming from the crown of the head” (*we don’t know his definition of “excess,” but we’d define it as anything more than “none”*). Ship’s medical had to use five staples to close the wound. —*As you can see, if you skip steps, there’s more than just a trip hazard. The hole in the deck is only so big. If you don’t stay vertical as you climb the ladder step-by-step, you won’t fit through the hole, and “Wham!”...you suddenly have a headache.*
- Was This What Happened to The Hindenburg? Two Sailors were carrying a compressed hydrogen bottle up an inclined ladderwell. Sailor #1 was at the bottom of the cylinder and Sailor #2 had the top. As Sailor 2 reached the top of the ladder, he accidentally stepped on the coaming and tripped (*it happens*). Sailor 2 lost control of the cylinder (*compressed Hydrogen!*), and it slid down and compressed Sailor 1’s hand against the ladderwell handrail – a fractured finger and 30 days of light duty. —*We commend Sailor 1 for keeping control of the flammable cylinder and for holding on enough to prevent falling. Note for all of us to learn, though: There is a cylinder-carrying bag designed for this that they did not use. Please use the gear that’s designed to keep you safe and unhurt.*
- Scuttle hatch or torture device? A Sailor was descending through a scuttle in the hangar bay. As he descended, he grabbed the hand wheel with his right hand and placed his left hand on the knife edge (*they call it that for a reason*). As you can imagine, the scuttle hatch wasn’t fully locked into place, causing it to slam shut on his fingers. —*Two broken fingers and a lesson in what not to do. This happens more than you may think. Don’t trust the latch. The wheel isn’t a climbing handle.*



Key Takeaways

Until “somethin’ better comes along” to get between decks—the next time you and your feet head for a ladder—remember these real-life lessons and takeaways:

1. **Slow is smooth and smooth is fast.** Rushing may seem faster, but on ladders, it often leads to you in a heap on the deck. Just like you learned in school fire drills, “Walk, don’t run.”
2. **Two slow trips on the ladders are better than one fast trip to medical.** If there’s too much to carry and hold the rail at the same time, make another trip or get help. Supervisors, do some of that supervisory stuff to help a young Sailor or Marine stay out of medical.
3. **Ask if “there’s an app for that.”** Until we read the hydrogen bottle mishap report, we didn’t know there was a cylinder-carrying bag. Did you? If you’ve got a heavy shipboard thing to move on the ladders, ask a supervisor if there’s a tool for that.
4. **Don’t trust the latch.** If you trust the scuttle latch will keep it in place when you pull yourself up by the wheel, sooner or later, it will cause you great pain. We’ve done it ourselves and been scared by it.

Remember, “Let’s be careful out there”