



Naval Safety Center

LESSONS LEARNED



LL 20-18

SWIMMING MISHAPS

As we pass the halfway point in the 101 critical days of summer, one popular activity has already taken three Marines from us...swimming. From 2014—2018, our database recorded 540 water-related mishaps. Of those, 209 (39 percent) were swimming related. Boating was second, with 78 reported mishaps. In the U.S., swimming-related fatalities rank as the fifth leading cause of unintentional deaths, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Drowning claims an average of nearly 4,000 lives annually, with one in five being children under the age of 14, and mostly in swimming pools. For people ages 15-35, more than 57 percent of drownings happened in natural waterways.

If the statistics don't alarm you, we recommend that you, at a minimum, consider your recreational swimming habits (and your family's) as you read on. Since civilian dependent mishaps are not reportable, we've compiled some examples of situations where active-duty members' recreational swims led to distress in minutes. Our family members' absence from the data base doesn't mean they aren't at risk, so read until the end. The takeaways for safe swimming apply to everyone. Our aim is that the lessons and takeaways from these tragic mishaps will make you think and assess the risks before your next swim.



- A Marine was on liberty with a group of friends at the beach. He was wave hopping in waist-deep water when a wave struck him and swept him into a rip current. His friends attempted to keep him afloat, but the Marine was panicking and pulling people underwater. He was eventually overcome and submerged. His friends pulled him back to shore and he was taken to a local hospital where he was pronounced deceased. In a matter of seconds, this Marine's liberty at the beach turned horribly tragic. The report indicated that the beach had no life guards and that yellow flags were posted, showing a "moderate risk of strong currents" and warning of "potential dangerous surf conditions." This mishap is a clear example of poor (or a lack of) risk management. The group ignored the

warnings and proceeded with their swim. — *Please heed the warnings and learn how to identify rip currents visually. See the 101 Critical Days of Summer presentation for more on rip currents on our public website at <https://navalsafetycenter.navy.mil/Safety-Promotions/Presentations/>.*

- Five Marines were hanging out at a local river. After wading out into the relatively shallow water, one of the Marines began to struggle and two others went in to assist. While the struggling Marine was rescued, one of the two assisting Marines drowned in the process. The report states that there were no indications that the river was unsafe or that alcohol was involved, but the mishap victim had only received basic water survival training and had "little to no experience with recreational activities in a natural waterway." Rivers present hazards that don't exist in pools. While the report lacks specific details, currents, visibility, bottom structure, and depth contour can increase the risk to swimmers. — *Know what you are getting into, literally.*

- A Sailor went for a swim alone...at dusk...in a lake which was 40 degrees Fahrenheit, according to a local news report. While there is scant information in the mishap report, the news article states that the Sailor notified one of his friends that he decided to go for the evening swim by himself. That friend went inside and told the third Sailor to come with him to keep an eye on the swimmer. When they returned, the Sailor was yelling for help, but they couldn't see him. His body was recovered the next afternoon. This completely avoidable mishap had a number of obvious red flags — swimming alone, at night, in 40-degree water. Hypothermia alone can cause muscle weakness and loss of strength within 10-20 minutes in 40-degree water. That's if you survive the "cold shock" response when you first jump in. That fact aside, all three factors likely contributed to this Sailor's unfortunate drowning. — *Never swim alone, no matter the circumstances.*



- Several Sailors spent an afternoon by the pool at a local recreation area socializing, eating, and drinking. Numerous other Sailors arrived throughout the afternoon and early evening. After sunset, four Sailors began swimming in the pool, repeatedly jumping in and swimming in both the shallow and deep ends. After approximately 20 minutes, one Sailor exited the pool and returned to the table. Two of the remaining three Sailors talked in the shallow end of the pool while the third Sailor was observed swimming in the deep end. Approximately five minutes later, a Sailor sitting near the deep end of the pool noticed the mishap Sailor motionless underwater. The Sailors quickly removed him from the pool and administered CPR until local emergency medical services (EMS) arrived. After several attempts to revive the Sailor, EMS pronounced him deceased at the scene. — *Need we say it? Don't drink and swim. A couple of drinks by the pool is OK, but drinking all day into the evening and hopping in the pool is asking for trouble. This tragedy happened silently, even in the presence of three shipmates. Keep that in mind the next time you head out for a day of liberty and swimming.*



Key Takeaways / Lessons Learned

In all but one of the examples above, the mishap victims were with other people when tragedy struck, yet they were unable to be saved. That should stand out as a sign of just how dangerous open water swimming can be. Even pools can be hazardous if you don't keep your wits about you (*hint; drink responsibly*). Our 101 Critical Days of Summer presentation contains tips on swimming safety, but here are some takeaways specifically from the previous examples.

1. **Know what you are getting into, literally.** We acknowledge that we said this earlier, but it bears repeating. Learn how to identify water conditions such as river currents, rip currents, and dangerous waves. Don't guess the bottom composition or depth. That leap of faith could leave you injured, paralyzed, or worse. Safety tip: Many public swimming areas post warning signs when waves and currents could be present, as in our example above. They are not decorations, please heed them.
2. **"Know thyself"** — Ancient Greek saying. With the above conditions in mind, know your swimming skill level and what circumstances you have the experience and fitness to handle. Even the strongest swimmers can get in trouble in seconds. Underestimating the sea's power or not knowing your swimming skills (or fatigue level) may be the last mistake you will ever make. Have kids? Teach them early to swim, and educate them on swimming safety. (See the 101 Critical Days of Summer presentation for more).
3. **Don't go it alone.** This statement should go without saying. People often drown right in front of their friends, and immediate resuscitation efforts still fail, so swimming alone only guarantees you will not make it if something happens to you. Whether it be a cramp or choking on a little water, it doesn't take much for a casual swim to become a distress case in a split second. Don't swim alone, or allow others to swim alone, and actively supervise young children.
4. **Don't drink and Swim.** If you already knew that statement was coming, an alarm should be going off in your head. "Don't drink and..." is a staple of our key takeaways because so many mishaps could have been avoided if the victims were not irresponsibly consuming alcohol. This lesson applies if you are supervising children in pools or at the beach too. We've shown what can happen to adults when no one is watching for a few seconds, so think about that, and act wisely.

This product is posted on the NAVSAFECEN CAC-enabled website at <https://intelshare.intelink.gov/sites/navsafe>, and on the public website at <https://navalsafetycenter.navy.mil/Safety-Promotions/Lessons Learned>.

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