



Naval Safety Center

LESSONS LEARNED



19-16

OFF-DUTY FIREARMS MISHAPS

“Don’t worry, it’s unloaded...”

Welcome to the latest edition of how NOT to handle weapons. Last year we published separate Marine Corps and Navy versions of this lesson because our warfighters had been negligently shooting themselves 300 percent more often off duty than on duty. Our discipline on the range and on duty wasn’t carrying home. Given what we’ve learned recently about how often we must be reminded of lessons (see LL 19-13, *The Half-Life of Scared*), it’s time to revisit the subject to help ensure we stay safe. Tragically we just lost another Sailor recently due to an accidental off-duty firearm mishap.

The data is not complete yet for 2019, but so far it appears that over the preceding 12 months of 2018-2019, our Navy and Marine Corps off-duty firearms mishaps have decreased from the preceding two years. Even so, the risk still exists. Even one is too many and avoidable. There are always examples that show us how to get better. Here is a random sampling of some of the recent events from both sides of our Blue and Green family:



- A Marine was disassembling his pistol. He failed to release the magazine, which was loaded with ammunition. When he pulled back the slide and released it, the weapon fired. He shot himself through the hand. - *And, as a bonus, also shot his buddy through the thigh.*

- A Sailor was sitting at home on the couch comparing his handgun to a friend's weapon. He had his finger on the trigger (*hmm...*) and while he was readjusting, he squeezed it. The report says, “the round struck his left large toe and came to a complete stop in the carpet which was later retrieved.” - *From that wording, I can’t tell whether they retrieved the round, his toe, or the carpet, but whatever it is, at least they got it back.*

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.

- A Sailor was changing the barrel on his personal firearm and it discharged into his left hand. - *Please treat every weapon as “loaded,” even when you are breaking it down. This is the cause of so many mishaps.*

- An officer returned home and removed his concealed carry pistol from the holster to put it away. He noticed that the safety had inadvertently been selected to “fire.” He removed the magazine and placed the pistol on the bed while taking care of other things. After going back to the car to retrieve a forgotten item, he resumed unloading the weapon. He noted the magazine had been removed and “assumed he had completed the unloading process.” He pulled the slide “slightly to the rear” to look into the chamber to ensure it was empty, but he didn’t see the round that was still there. Since the safety had not been reapplied, the hammer had been fully cocked. He depressed the trigger to release the hammer. Bang! The bullet went through the bathroom door, both sides of the linen closet, into the underside of the bathroom sink, and was finally stopped by a drawer bracket. Our shocked gunman verified the bullet path to ensure no one was injured. The report says he then “rechecked that the pistol was completely safe.” - *Better late than never. Our gunslinger does deserve credit for good muzzle discipline. Although he failed to follow Rule #1 (treat every weapon as loaded) by failing spectacularly to properly clear the weapon, because he did adhere to Rule #2 (keep it pointed in a safe direction), nothing was hurt other than a door and some walls. Important additional safety note: drywall and doors don’t stop bullets.*

- A Marine called the base Provost Marshals to report that he had accidentally shot himself in the left index finger. The only explanation the report offers is that the Marine had gone shooting earlier in the day and after four beers decided to clean his weapon. - *Sigh. Is a comment even necessary?*
- A Marine was traveling with a loaded revolver in his vehicle. When he braked the weapon slid onto the floor of the vehicle, hitting the hammer of the weapon and cocking it. He attempted to ease the hammer back forward, but lost his grip, discharging the weapon in the vehicle. He scored two points, by successfully shooting both legs. - *The report doesn't tell us if the vehicle was still traveling down the road while he was juggling the weapon. Texting and driving is bad enough.*

Lessons Learned

This part should sound very familiar if you read last year's versions of this lesson. These are not new lessons. They are the same ones people have learned again and again since the invention of firearms. All of these incidents result from failing to follow the basic tenets of firearm safety. There are four main firearm safety rules, but we'll continue to keep it simple by focusing on just the top two:

1. Treat every firearm as if it is loaded.

This includes:

- A weapon you just unloaded (or "think" you unloaded).
- A weapon your buddy just handed you...or you just handed back to your buddy.
- Even a weapon you just dismantled into four pieces and is sitting on the table!

2. Never point a loaded weapon (see #1) at anything you don't intend to shoot.

This doesn't just mean "purposefully aiming" – it means **Muzzle Discipline**. Don't ever let the muzzle cover anything you aren't willing to shoot, including (but not limited to):

- Any body parts you want to keep attached.
- Any friends you want to keep (*they will definitely be less friendly after you shoot them*).
- The thin wall of the room, on the other side of which you can't see who is there (it has happened...).

Following just these two basic rules would have avoided 98% of the off-duty firearm mishaps in the past three years!



Recommendations

1. Share this lesson with all Navy, Marine, and civilian personnel...and their families.
2. Remember and USE these two basic firearm safety rules, even off-duty.
3. Please (PLEASE!) don't mix alcohol and firearms. It doesn't turn out well.

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