



NAVAL SAFETY COMMAND SAFETY AWARENESS DISPATCH



SA 25-28

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.



We mentioned in our 101 Critical Days of Summer Wrap-Up dispatch a few weeks ago, after motor vehicle and sports-related mishaps, stairs were the most common mishaps hurting our folks off-duty. This pattern persists if we look at the entire fiscal year. We are falling, slipping, tripping or striking against stairs A LOT. 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, where he received 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. 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.*

Stair-Related Mishaps

- **It's the Handrail That'll Getcha!** A Sailor on watch as a sentry heard a loud noise from the lobby of the building where he was on duty. Heading to investigate, he (*quickly*) took a staircase down to investigate the noise. While descending the staircase, his hand was caught in the railing while moving, causing his finger to get trapped and consequently fractured, as he found out later at medical. —*No word on what caused the noise and 'Well done!' for quickly getting after duties as the watch. Poor hand placement in the railing (rather than on top of) combined with momentum of moving quickly down the stairs caused the injury. Move slower and more intentionally. We say it all the time, "Slow is smooth and smooth is fast." Trying to go faster takes longer, especially after the trip to medical.*
- **Nature Called – The ER Answered.** A Sailor was out for dinner with friends at a restaurant. Needing to make a quick trip to the restroom, he headed down the stairs to the first floor. The staircase was poorly lit. He missed a step and fell down the remaining stairs. Initially, he thought he'd bruised his femur and continued on with the evening, but a couple hours later, he was taken to the hospital due to worsening pain. The medical staff determined he had a fractured femur and transferred him to another facility where he underwent surgery followed by a two-week hospital stay. —*Stairs have a nasty way of reminding you how dangerous they can be when you don't exercise proper caution when using them. Risk management in this case would simply consist of a quick risk assessment to recognize the stairs were poorly lit and then take precautions to minimize the identified risk. Going slower and using the handrail could have made the trip to the restroom much less painful.*
- **When a Baby Gate Becomes a Hurdle.** A servicemember was at home cleaning on the second floor. They put up a baby gate at the top of the stairs (*you know, for safety purposes*). A family member called out for them to come outside. So, the servicemember headed down the stairs by stepping over the baby gate. First one leg, then the oth...wait. First one leg then the other...was the plan. The member's other leg got hung up by the baby gate causing them to trip and fall down the staircase, leaving the member breathless and motionless at the bottom for a period of 15 minutes. Their family member then called 911 and they went to the nearest hospital. Fortunately, no major injuries were noted, but a couple weeks of light limited duty followed. —*Let's not make walking down stairs any harder than it has to be. The stats already prove it's not as easy as you'd think. In this case, moving the baby gate would have been the prudent move, rather than stepping over it and descending the stairs simultaneously. Stop, take a few moments to think through what you're about to do. That one step before an activity will usually make a difference for the better.*



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 to 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 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."