Naval Safety Center

LESSONS LEARNED

18-09

Off-Duty Hiking and Swimming Mishaps

"Risk Management isn't just for work anymore..."

In August the VCNO released an NAVADMIN highlighting the preventable off-duty mishaps that have claimed the lives of seven shipmates so far this year. Disappointingly, these losses aren't a one-time event, but a continuation of incidents that harm us as a force. Arguably, there are always events which could be described as purely accidental – unexpected and unanticipated. Many of our recreational, off-duty mishaps, however, are completely avoidable with only a basic application of risk management. Risk Management is not a program or a checklist. It is a tool designed to alter the way we think and perceive the world – and the hazards and risks – around us. As part of the role of command, our O-5 and O-6 leaders must accept greater responsibility for involved leadership to ensure our Sailors and Officers are trained with – and indoctrinated to use – risk management tools to prevent mishaps both on-duty and off-duty. Hiking and swimming seem to be two predominant activities where we have been falling short in our application of risk management. Here are a few highlights:

- Despite posted signs, a Sailor and his shipmates were hiking on a coastal trail that was marked as off-limits. The Sailor was struck by a wave and swept off the trail. Witnesses saw him being carried off, but were unable to assist. The Sailor perished before rescue divers could arrive on scene.

- A Sailor was hiking with shipmates. During the hike, the weather deteriorated into rain, fog, and high winds. The Sailor attempted to descend a nearly vertical rock face using a rope he found already in place. He slipped, lost grip on the rope, and fell approximately 50 feet. He did not survive the fall.

- While hiking with friends, a Sailor tripped as he headed down the trail, striking his chin and then his shoulder, causing him to lose consciousness for a few seconds. Upon regaining consciousness, the Sailor noted a small scratch on his chin and minor pain in his shoulder, but HE DECIDED TO CONTINUE HIKING and kept doing so till the late afternoon. At home that evening, he experienced severe pain in his shoulder and proceeded to the ER where he was diagnosed with a muscle sprain. This Sailor only received minor injuries. With his decision to continue the hike, despite blacking out, we are fortunate that he didn't harm himself further.

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Off-Duty Hiking and Swimming Mishaps

- A Sailor was hiking down to a swimming hole with other shipmates. He was leading the hike, walking in the shallow creek bed. He thought he was stepping onto a rock surface, but it was actually a deep hole hidden underwater. The Sailor fell into the hole filled with water, cutting his nose on the rocks. His partners helped him out of the hole, and the group climbed out of the creek bed and rode bicycles three miles to a store to call a duty corpsman. He got away with four stitches and limited duty for three weeks. If not for luck, certainly not risk management, he easily could have been another fatality.

- A Sailor and his friends rented a pontoon boat for a day. In the morning they anchored in water approximately three feet deep to enable easy access in and out of the boat. During the day the Sailor consumed hard liquor and was swimming and diving off of the boat into the shallow water. At around 1600 he dove into the water and did not stand back up. He floated to the surface face down and did not move. The Sailor's buddy jumped in to assist and supported him while the group helped get him back into the boat. Approximately 10 minutes after the 911 call, a coast guard vessel arrived on scene, stabilized the Sailor, and transported him to the coast guard station from which he was airlifted to the ER. The Sailor severed his spinal cord and was paralyzed from the neck down. The report notes that his blood alcohol content was double the legal limit for driving. There is no official alcohol limit for swimming and diving, but basic risk management principles would have helped this Sailor and his buddies avoid this hazard if they had used them.

- An Officer elected to go for a swim in the bay around 2100. He noticed some fishermen near one end of the causeway and decided to swim near the other end. He had finished a few laps in the area when he heard a boat. He stopped and looked but could not see it. The Officer thought it was heading in a different direction and continued to swim. Still hearing the boat, he pulled his head out of the water just in time to see the boat almost upon him. He dove from the surface but was unable to completely clear the boat and was struck. Upon surfacing, the Officer examined his leg and felt bone. He started calling for help and swimming back toward the causeway. Fishermen responded to his calls, helped him to shore, and remained with him until EMS arrived. He suffered severe lacerations to both legs. The hazards and risks associated with swimming alone, at night, in a well-traveled waterway seemingly should be clear.

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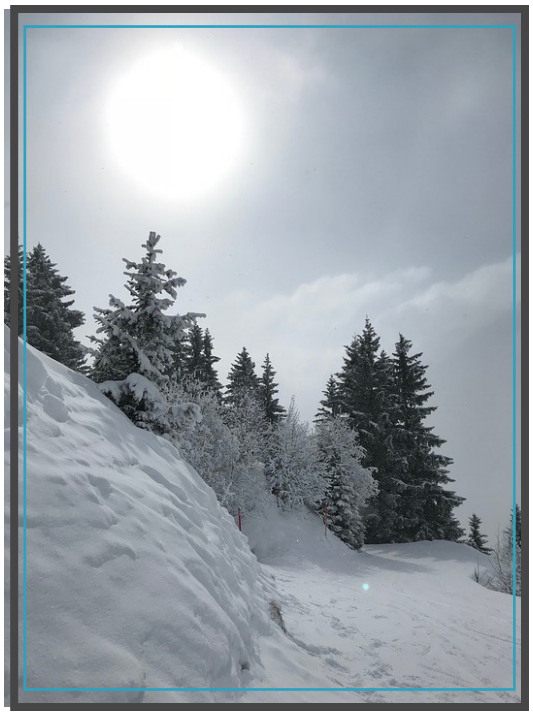

- A Sailor and his buddies went on a hiking trip. This Sailor was an experienced hiker, and he elected to pursue a path that no one else in the group was experienced enough to follow. He took his hiking gear and survival kit, and drove alone to the furthest part of the trail. Snow and ice on the ground obscured the normally distinct and well-walked path. The Sailor saw footprints in the snow from a previous hiker and decided to follow them. As he followed the footprints, he stepped on an unseen tree root which gave way, causing him to fall approximately 100 feet. A tree broke his fall – and many of his ribs. He was able to use his cell phone to contact help and was soon rescued. This is arguably an example of good deliberate risk management (proper prep before the trip; survival gear; cell phone and contact info; not taking inexperienced hikers on the trail), but failing to effectively apply time critical ORM (electing to proceed on a hazardous, "varsity level" trail, after discovering it was obscured by snow/ice).

- A Sailor was hiking before dawn with two other service members. He elected to jump from a rock into a large area of overgrown grass. What he did not anticipate was the pile of metal hidden in the grass, which caused multiple large lacerations. He immediately reported to the ER where, ironically, they had to put more metal in his legs, with upwards of 50 staples to repair the damage. Hiking in low light is dangerous on its own. A moment to consider possible hazards before making that jump would have saved this Sailor much pain and his shipmates much time in making up of lost work.

These are just a sampling of the approximately 700 off-duty hiking and water related mishaps over the past five years. Although only a small number of these mishaps resulted in fatalities, most of those who escaped death or permanent injury did so only by blind luck or providence. We must do better! Our O-5 and O-6 commanders are the front-line in this effort. It's important that leaders at all levels set an example by practicing what we preach. Get to know your people and help them make wise choices both on and off the job. That's really all ORM is – a tool to help us make smart decisions.

Lessons / Recommendations

1. Practice Risk Management, even off-duty. Just the first step — identifying a possible hazard — goes a long way to ensuring you stay alive and uninjured.

2. Leaders: Get to know your people. Ask questions. Be involved and aware of their choices on and off the job.

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