



How do you fall from a **Tree Stand?**

By LCdr Ben Walker, Staff, USCINCEUR

Finding the answer to that question took me 34 years. Somewhere, it's written that one of every three hunting mishaps involves tree stands, and I'm among that 33 percent. Here's my story. I was back from a short underway period to prepare for deployment and was spending the week between Christmas and New Year's hunting with my father. The two of us were excited that early morning we set off for the family's hunting land. The previous day, I had sighted a 10-point buck — a monster in this neck of the woods. However, fate wasn't on my side that day. The deer disappeared into the thick bush before I had a decent shot.

My father and I scouted for a better spot to put up a tree stand. I wanted a spot that would give me a better shot if the animal returned. To my disappointment, the trees in the surrounding area were tall but thin pines. The ground around the trees was deeply padded with beds of fallen pine needles. Because I was familiar with the uses and benefits of Operational Risk Management (ORM), we discussed possible options. The first question we asked: "Was it worth spending a strenuous afternoon moving the two tree stands to this location?" The answer was easy: "With the size of that deer, heck yeah!"

The size of the available trees meant we couldn't use tree-climbing stands, but a ladder-type tree stand might work. Being concerned about the security of the stand's legs in the soft ground, I drove the legs as deep as possible. I also gathered a few stones and put them into the ground around the legs for more security (or so I thought). Once I had tied off the stand's seat to the tree, I felt sure

there was no chance of the seat falling.

The second question we asked was, "Are you concerned about the tree rocking?" To be safe, I spent some time and cleared out branches and small seedlings around my stand. I had designated the left side of the stand as my throw-down area (a spot where I could toss my gun without it hitting something on the way down). This precaution would come in handy if I slipped while in the stand and needed both hands to steady myself. My father was pleased I had taken these extra safety measures. He agreed the chances for windy conditions were remote, and knowing I always used a safety strap while in the stand, he felt there was no cause for alarm.

On that fateful morning, however, there was a slight change in the weather — it was colder than usual. We parked the truck, then started removing our hunting gear and suiting up. I had it all: warm clothes, orange vest, lucky orange cap, extra bullets, water canteen, hunting license, camouflage seat cushion (yes, we believe in some comfort when roughing it), whistle, binoculars, and, of course, my trusty safety strap.

I had put all my gear in the large pockets of my jacket, except for my strap, when my father asked for some help. He couldn't find some of his gear in the back of the truck. Because it was still dark, I grabbed a flashlight and laid my strap on top of the truck. I then gathered his gear and helped him suit up.

"We have a 15-minute hike into the woods, and it won't be dark much longer," said my father. I knew what he meant. It was important for us to be in our stands at least 20 minutes before sunrise. As I watched the light

from his flashlight slowly disappear down the trail, I sensed that he was ready to go and that I was holding us up. I located my flashlight, and hurried to catch my father.

It took us about 20 minutes to walk to the first tree stand, which was my father's, and I spent some time helping him get into position. As I lifted his gun to him, I realized I had forgotten to retrieve my strap from the top of the truck, and I mentioned it to him. He knew I was bothered; he always has joked that I'm a little "overly safe." With a sorrowful look, he just said, "Even if you raced back to the truck to get it, you wouldn't have enough time to get into your stand before first light."

I knew he wanted me to get that 10-point deer. He offered his strap to me, but I wouldn't take it because I wasn't going to sacrifice his safety for mine. The safety strap was there to reduce injuries in a fall. If either of us was to fall (which hadn't yet occurred), I felt I'd have a better chance of landing on my feet with little or no problem. After all, my tree stand was only 15 feet high. As a kid, I always had been able to jump off rooftops or tree limbs, hit the ground, and roll back up to my feet like a cat. "Dad, I'll be fine," I assured. My father nodded and turned off his flashlight, which I took as his signal of approval. I left for my stand, and, within 10 minutes, I was in position, with my gun in my lap, awaiting the sun to rise.

As the sun came up, I could tell it was going to be a beautiful morning — albeit an extremely cold one. I wasn't worried because I had warm clothes, including a pair of gloves. My trigger finger wasn't going to be slow this time. However, I was worried about the seat of my stand, which was made of wood. The cold weather made the seat slippery, and my cushion couldn't get a firm grip. "OK," I thought, "ORM requires a control to minimize this risk — sit in the middle, and don't move. Done."

I was getting used to the cold when I heard a sound in the distance, looked up, and saw the first signs of a stiff wind working its way toward me. "Great!" I thought, "After five days of perfect hunting weather, I'm going to have to deal with the cold and the wind." I was upset because these conditions usually make deer bed down and stay quiet. As the wind strengthened, my tree began to sway. Again, ORM crept into my mind, and I wondered, "Is it worth my suf-

fering the effects of the cold and risking being blown about to bag this particular buck?" My answer was, "With the size of that deer, heck yeah!"

I started doubting the deer would be moving this morning. I looked at my watch, and only 15 minutes remained before it would be the same time of day I had seen that buck the day before. I convinced myself to wait those 15 minutes to give the deer a chance to show itself before getting down.

Not 10 minutes later, I heard a large "cracking" sound in the distance — another tree breaking, but not mine. As I turned to look in the general direction of the sound, a weird sensation came over me, and, before I knew what was happening, the base legs of my tree stand buckled in the soft earth. The ladder portion of my stand twisted and the seat pivoted downward to the left. With the seat as slick as ice, my cushion (with my bottom still attached) had no choice but to follow the law of gravity. The seat cushion soon separated from me and floated softly to earth. I, on the other hand, didn't.

As I fell, my body twisted in the air such that I ended up falling headfirst toward the ground. I knew that orange hunting cap wasn't going to be much of a substitute for a helmet, so I started maneuvering to protect my head. Miraculously, I was able to twist enough to land on my right shoulder and roll with the fall. My left hand with arm outstretched held the gun parallel to my body and the ground, so it didn't hurt me. However, I landed on my binoculars while rolling, and they knocked the wind out of me.

Glad to be alive, I lay on the ground, mentally checking for broken bones, while trying to regain my breath. I released my gun, reached into a side pocket with my left hand, and removed my whistle. By the time I got it to work, though, my father already was crashing through the woods, figuring he would find me under the splintered remains of a tree.

I stayed on the ground as my father looked me over, then stood up, gathered all my gear, and started the trek back to the truck. We talked about the change in the weather but really

were thanking the Lord (silently) that I was able to walk at all. Once we got to the truck, I grabbed my safety strap off the top of the truck and stowed it with the rest of my gear in the hunting bags.

What lesson did I learn from this incident? The desire to complete the mission — to bag that deer — was strong with me. When someone starts talking about how important the mission is above everything else, little red flags should go up. If I find that the proper gear isn't available at work, we simply don't do the mission until the problem is corrected. The requirement for PPE exists for a reason. Away from work, I was able to rationalize that I didn't need a safety strap. The warning signs were present; I just didn't recognize or act on them.

What did this lesson cost me? Remember the deployment I mentioned at



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the start of this story? Well, I never made it. "A

freak fall" is what the doctors called it. I had torn three tendons in my right shoulder and wasn't able to lift my arm more than 45 degrees from my side — not good when you're a pilot. I had surgery a month later, and, because recovery time was going to be long, and my status wasn't known, I was forced to delay my command as the Officer in Charge (OIC) of a helicopter detachment. That is what hit me the hardest. My failure to use my safety training cost me an opportunity that I had worked hard to achieve. I also had to endure the ridicule of my peers, who coined call signs such as "Right Wing Low,"

"One Wing," and "Zephyr" (a rogue wind).

I learned my lesson, and I recovered from my injury and am back flying. The Navy even found another opportunity to send me on a later deployment as the OIC of a detachment. I would like to pass on this wisdom from my father: "Things happen for a reason. It's always less painful to learn from others' mistakes, but when it's your mistake, you tend to have a clearer insight to the how's and why's. Tell your story, and let others learn from it. So what if they laugh, it's a small price to pay, and it easily could have been worse."

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