

“I’ll Be There in a Minute”

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Photo by Rae Mack

When you use a ladder—for any reason—always make sure someone holds it for you.

Had done it a hundred times: Lean a ladder against the house, extend the ladder, have his wife hold it, climb onto the roof, have his wife pass him the awnings, install them.

He had taken all the necessary precautions. It was a dry day, he had good shoes and gloves, and the ladder was the right length. His wife would help him get started, then she would go inside to clean windows and assist him only if needed. Everything went well, and he was done in an hour. “Maybe I’ll get in 18 holes of golf today,” he thought. Wrong!

He hollered inside and told his wife all the awnings were up and asked if she would come hold the ladder. “I’ll be there in a minute,” she replied. Knowing better and not wanting to wait for his wife, he started climbing down. After all, he had made several trips up and down the ladder by himself before today.

There was one important difference this time, though. The ladder’s feet were resting on a slick part of the driveway. As he started descending, the feet began to slip on the slick asphalt. His wife emerged from the house just in time to see him hit the driveway and land on top of the ladder.

His right elbow shattered when it hit the driveway, but that injury was minor, compared to another one he suffered in the fall. His right leg had slipped through the rungs, and, when the ladder smacked the asphalt, it snapped his leg halfway between the ankle and knee. The ensuing compound fracture severed the femoral artery, and he began to bleed uncontrollably. His wife applied a tourniquet, but she put it on so tightly the doctors had to cut it off at the hospital.

After three days in the ICU, three operations on his ankle, and three stainless-steel screws later, my father still hadn’t played even one hole of golf. His right ankle was swollen yet to twice the size of his left one, and he just had regained full motion in his elbow.

What can be learned from this incident? Two things come to mind. First, even the simplest job can be dangerous. There’s a reason a warning sticker is affixed to every ladder sold in the United States, detailing precautions for its use: Have someone else hold the ladder, don’t climb on the top step, keep the ladder away from high-tension wires. All these warnings are a result of someone else’s accident; follow the warnings, just like you do NATOPS.

The second lesson to be learned is that familiarity breeds contempt. My father had been up and down that ladder, doing the same task, for more than 30 years. This wasn’t the first time he had descended the ladder alone; in fact, he had put up the awnings solo numerous times. He knew the right way to descend was with someone holding the ladder. You can bet he’ll wait for help the next time—whether it’s one minute or a hundred and one. **■**

The author was assigned to VAQ-131 when he wrote this article.