

A person wearing camouflage clothing is seen from behind, climbing a metal tree stand. The stand is made of several vertical poles and horizontal rungs. The background is a soft-focus green forest with sunlight filtering through the trees.

Think before you Climb

Photos By TSgt Ben Bloker, Langley AFB, Va.

The crisp fall air brings with it one of the most highly anticipated times of the year for many — hunting season. Whether for recreation or sport, hunting brings many people into the nation's woodlands and forests each year.

Unfortunately, not all hunters will leave those woodlands and forests the same way they came in. Some will leave on a stretcher; some by the assistance of a buddy; and some in a body bag. Some will be the victims of shooting accidents and some will fall from tree stands.



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Hunting is actually one of the safer sports going, with far fewer injuries each year than, say, touch football, Frisbee football, or even your unit's physical fitness program. The truth is, with the exception of a hunter being mistaken for game, a large percentage of hunting injuries involve needless falling from a height. Typically, 25 percent of gun hunters and more than 80 percent of all bow hunters will hunt from an elevated platform, shooting house, or tree stand this season. Many will be hurt this season for failing to adhere to a few basic tree stand hunting safety tips.

All avid deer hunters no doubt have spent countless hours in the woods looking for deer sign, selecting hunting locations, pouring over topo-

graphic maps, and picking out accessories, ammunition, clothing, and guns. You have cleaned and lubricated your firearm, checked and rechecked the zero at the local range, prepared your hunting clothing, purchased hundreds of dollars worth of scents and lures, and now you're ready to dig that old tree stand out of the garage and throw it in the back of your pickup truck, right? WRONG!

You would never skip a preflight check of your aircraft or preventive maintenance checks and services on a military vehicle, so why are you willing to climb 25 to 30 feet up a tree in a possibly deadlined tree stand? No one intentionally falls out of a tree, but when the ex-

citement of bagging that first buck of the season hits you as you pull the trigger, it is easy to lose your situational awareness and fail to remember that the first step leads straight down 25 feet or more!

Before you go out hunting this season in a tree stand, platform, or shooting house, please adhere to the following cautions and safety tips.

If you are using a commercial tree stand, read the instruction manual. If this will be the first time you are using the stand, thoroughly read the instructions and then practice, practice, practice. Start low on the tree and become completely familiar with the features of your stand. You should be able to put the stand up blindfolded. If the tree stand is one you've

used before, look it over carefully each time you use it for worn or missing hardware. All tree stands have parts and pieces that could loosen, wear, or even break with extended time and use.

There are essentially three types of tree stands: the climbing tree stand, the chain-on tree stand, and the tripod platform tree stand. Regardless of which type of stand you are using, it is imperative that a high-quality safety harness be used. Do not use any stand without a body harness, body strap, or safety belt. When climbing, descending, or sitting stationary in your tree stand, secure your harness so that you will not fall more than 10 to 15 inches to prevent serious chest or internal injuries. If you are using a self-climbing, two-piece tree stand, ensure that the top and bottom pieces are secured by a rope. There is nothing worse than having the lower half of your stand fall away to the ground, leaving you up a tree without a bottom stand to get back down.

Just like an aircraft, tree stands have maximum gross weight limits that are set by the manufacturer. These weight limits are often misunderstood. For example, if you weigh 240 pounds and plan on using a 250-pound rated stand (the most common size), then you stand a pretty good chance of becoming a statistic. The weight rating is absolute and includes all clothing, guns, and accessories that will be in the stand with you. Common sense would dictate that you either lose some weight in a hurry or move up to a larger stand.

If you plan on using an old wooden stand you found nailed to a tree, be aware of the laws in your state about using such stands. If you elect to use a wooden stand, thoroughly inspect the boards for warped or rotten lumber. If in doubt, don't use the stand.

If you will be using a ladder to climb to the top of your shooting platform or chain-on stand, do not climb with your bow and arrows or gun. This rule also applies for descending back down to the ground. Tie one end of a rope or strap to your belt, and the other to your hunting weapon. Once you are secure at your hunting eleva-

tion, pull up your gun or bow. Many a hunter has slipped while climbing a ladder. Bow hunters have fallen on their bow or arrows, impaling themselves, and other hunters have fallen on their firearm or dropped it, resulting in an accidental shooting when the gun discharged.

Be wary of wet or cold weather as well as low visibility (sunrise/sunset) when climbing. Do not climb any vertical step (ladder) unless you can keep your body centered over the steps at all times. Do not climb a tree or ladder that is standing in water. The root system may be weak or the ground soft, allowing your ladder to shift or sink. If you are in a metal tree stand and you see lightning, get out of the stand immediately.

Finally, before you head out to the woods this year, please remember that alcohol and drugs do not mix with hunting. Never hunt alone, if possible. If you must go alone, leave a map of where you will be going with a relative and an expected time that you will be back. Nearly everyone has a cellular phone, but if you do not, borrow one. A cell phone could mean not spending agonizing hours injured in the woods waiting for help to arrive. Plan on getting a lot of sleep the night before, eat well, and stay hydrated. Use a little common sense, and always use a body strap or harness. Hopefully, your next hunting trip will be a safe and successful one. ▶

Editor's Note: *Courtesy of the Army Safety Center*



Beware of Surplus Firearms

By TSgt Gregory D. Nelson, Mountain Home AFB, Idaho

A firearm is a piece of equipment that works on the border of producing too much pressure for it and its operator's own good. Most modern metallic cartridges operate at a bore pressure of more than 50,000 copper units of pressure. That power alone could throw wood or metal fragments hundreds of times further than the few inches these weapons are from the user's face and body when being fired. So any firearm you are thinking of shooting should be in a safe working condition.

Today, many gun shows and shops are filled with old surplus military firearms or "relics" as they are called. These relics have come from all over the world in practically every shape and style that is out there. Many of these firearms are a real bargain. Some sell for less than \$100 while others, depending on the style and availability, will go for a considerable amount more. Many can be made into hunting or sporting rifles while others are left as is for historical value. Sometimes they look as though they have been through a battle or two, and they could have been, while others appear to be brand new or "unissued." The problem is that looks can be deceiving.

No one can visually look at a chamber and tell if it is properly sized or spaced to be considered a "shooter" or a "curio" (non-fireable). The weapons status should be determined by a properly trained and equipped gunsmith. Most of these weapons also have serial numbers on all the major components of the entire gun. When these match, you have at least a complete gun, but even then it is not a sure thing that it is safe.

Many folks can't tell the difference between a complete weapon or one that is considered a "Frankenstein." A Frankenstein is a piece that has been built out of cannibalized components from one or more complete guns that had something wrong with it making it useless. By combining the good pieces and assembling them into a somewhat complete firearm, it can now be sold as a functioning weapon. These components should be from the same model or design of gun to fit together correctly. However, they may have been manufactured in a different factory or in another country altogether. On top of this, the date when these components were made could be more than 70 years apart from one another. I have not heard of any importers who buy these weapons or components testing the final product for serviceability. Instead they

ship them out to dealers by the thousands still caked with corrosion preventative as thick as fat on a market pig. An unknowing buyer who heard about or saw a great deal their buddy got on one of these will go down to the local shop asking for one of the same models, thinking they are getting the same great deal. When, in fact, they may be buying a ticking time bomb!

The terms describing the condition or grade of these relic weapons can also be misleading, since it is based on the exterior quality. Not all gun shops really know the true condition of each surplus rifle or handgun they receive. Military rifles normally do not have the cartridge size stamped on the side of the barrel as is common in most commercial manufacturing plants. So ammunition is also a concern with a military weapon. I can think of six different 7.62 mm (.30 caliber) military rounds off the top of my head that are out there. Some rounds will fit inside the chamber of these different barrels and can be fired without difficulty — but the results could be explosive to say the least. Some of these bullets are not a true size diameter, actually being larger than 7.62 mm. This could really cause a pressure increase or barrel block. So know what ammunition goes into which rifle; write it or stamp it on the barrel or stock if you need a reminder.

A good rule to go by is to have a used gun tested and inspected by a competent gunsmith before you buy or at the least before you shoot. It really doesn't cost that much that it will sour a sweet deal. Besides you don't want to trade safety for a good deal. The face you save may be your own. ▶

