

Look Before

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What could be better than a squadron day off—other than it being a Friday (early start for a weekend) and going mountain-biking at Ft. Eby on a beautiful February afternoon? If you're in a group of people who appreciate what the Northwest has to offer, you're thinking, "Not a whole lot!"

Two friends and I had decided it was the perfect time to go mountain-biking at one of our favorite spots. We had been to Ft. Eby many times and knew the trails—or thought we did. The more we rode throughout the afternoon, the more confidence

we gained. The steep hills, sharp turns, bumps, and drop-offs were keeping us on our toes, but they also were the most fun.

We decided to finish the day by riding on the cliffs overlooking the passage between Whidbey Island and the Olympic peninsula. Breathtaking views and a perilously steep 200-foot cliff would give us that little extra adrenaline rush we needed. We ended up at the "Gun Turret," which is a little place for people to picnic and enjoy the view. There also are some stairs and several "chutes" and drop-offs leading to the lower plateau on the cliff.



I had ridden in this area many times and always had navigated the challenges with ease. We about were ready to call it a day and head for our traditional after-ride brew when one of my friends said, “Hey, a little farther up the trail is another ‘chute’ that’ll take us to the lower plateau.” Always game for something new and exciting, I followed him

You Ride!

about 100 yards. He explained that the trail went down. “It’s so steep you can’t see the bottom from here,” he said. “After a right turn about 20 yards down the path, though, it straightens out, and you can see the bottom, as well as where it leads into the plateau.”

Because I’m not one for caution, I said, “I reckon I’ll go first.” Starting down the steep trail, I held my brakes through the right turn, navigating the bumps and the turn with ease. I then looked about 40 yards ahead and didn’t see anything, so I let off the brakes. My speed picked up quickly, and while looking way out ahead, I didn’t notice

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a path running perpendicular to the trail at the very bottom. In fact, it formed a 3-foot-wide shelf. Unfortunately, this discovery didn’t come until it was too late for me to stop, turn or do anything. I was going over whether I wanted to or not.

My friends later said I came off the shelf and did one-and-a-half flips with the bicycle before landing on my left side. All I could feel was pain in my lower left back and left leg, and I couldn’t get up. My friends ran down the trail to check on my condition. One then raced to the parking area, where a forest ranger happened to be. He determined that I needed an ambulance.

Thirty minutes later, I was on my way back up the hill on a backboard, then into the open doors of a waiting ambulance. A five-minute ride later, I was on an X-ray table at Whidbey Island General Hospital, getting shots in my lower back. I was relieved to find I hadn’t broken anything in my back; I had some deep bruises, though.

As I was getting ready to leave the hospital, I asked the doctor a couple of questions: “Why does it hurt here, and how long will it be before I feel a little better?” He replied by tugging on my left leg, and when I said “Ouch!” he ordered an X-ray

of my leg. The results showed two cracks on the upper part—not good. I knew I would be down for at least a month waiting for the breaks to heal.

My wife, kids and I went back to the accident site to get a better picture of what had happened to me. I determined a depth-perception illusion must have kept me from seeing the shelf while going down the hill, which, incidentally, was much steeper than I originally had thought. We tried to figure out how far through the air I had gone before hitting the ground. We found two gouges in the dirt: one from my handle bar and the other from my pedal. These gouges were about 30 feet past the shelf! “Wow, no wonder that seemed like one heck of a ride!” I thought. The \$1,200 medical bill the Navy had to pay didn’t make me feel any better about the incident.

Here are some lessons I learned from that ride:

- ✓ Scope out an area before going mountain-biking. I thought I knew what lay ahead, and I assumed I had gotten good “gouge.”

- ✓ Always wear protective equipment. It’s a good thing I was wearing riding shoes, padded shorts, gloves, and a helmet that day. I later found out I had cracked my helmet.

- ✓ Make sure you do a little trail ORM—before you fly or ride. For 30 days, I couldn’t fly, couldn’t run, or do anything but hobble around and hope for fast healing. ❌

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