

Ah, It's Just a Sprain



Here's what a broken fibula looks like.

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After a three-week detachment to China Lake, Calif., I had taken leave, in conjunction with orders, to spend Christmas with my mother. It had snowed four or five inches the week before I arrived, so I would have a white Christmas after all. During most of the time I was home, we had rainy, warm days and cold nights—conditions that kept the snow on the ground iced over.

Christmas was great—we had a big gathering at my mother's place, complete with gifts, dinner, and all the other usual events. Then, it was time to visit some friends.

On Dec. 27, my brother-in-law invited me to help him sight in his rifle. We arrived at one of the local shooting ranges, which, in Alaska, is an open field that no one lives around. After shooting a box of shells, we decided to change targets, so off I went with new targets in hand.

Crossing the field was no problem, but the targets were located down a small ravine. I had taken three or four steps when I started sliding, hit a rut in the ice, and sprained my ankle—or, so I thought. I yelled to my brother-in-law, so he came over and helped me back to the car. We then shot another box of shells and went to his house, where I iced down my ankle and elevated it to minimize the swelling.

I put a couple of Ace bandages on my ankle the next morning (Dec. 28) and headed back to my mother's house. I was supposed

to leave on the 29th. As fate would have it, though, a snowstorm shut down the New York airport, so I changed my tickets to leave Jan. 1. All seemed to be OK. I would get to spend New Year's Eve with my family and still have enough time left to get back to Spain.

By the time I left Alaska Jan. 1, and arrived at Jerez airport three days later, my calf had swollen. I kept it elevated and iced down for the next two days, but it still didn't look good. At my wife's insistence, we went to the emergency room at Rota Naval Hospital, where doctors soon figured out my ankle wasn't sprained. My fibula was broken about three or four inches above my ankle, and, because I had been walking on it for 11 days, the fibula and tibia had separated.

The doctors showed my X-rays to an orthopedic surgeon, who came to my room, introduced himself, and said he would see me Jan. 8, for surgery. At 10 o'clock that morning, I went into surgery and had a seven-screw, dynamic-compression plate put on my fibula to pull the bones back together. The surgeon put me on 10 days of convalescent leave and told me I would spend two weeks in a non-weight-bearing cast. He said I then would wear a walking cast for three more weeks. After that, he would X-ray my ankle and leg to make sure they were healing right and decide if I needed to wear a walking boot.

Besides missing 11 days of work, I would spend three months on light duty and perhaps would have ankle problems the rest of my life.

What did I learn from this episode? If you hurt yourself, no matter where you are, immediately have someone at a military or civilian hospital check your injury. Otherwise, you may set off metal detectors in airports the rest of your life. ❏

Since misery loves company, read the tale that follows about another Sailor from a different squadron who also broke his ankle. This victim suffered his injury while snowboarding.