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As an aviator, I mostly think about safety while I'm in the air. I spend the majority of my life on the ground, though, so I'm more likely to have a mishap there. I had a close call during a sightseeing trip to Yosemite.

To see Yosemite in the winter is spectacular. Visitors are rare, which makes it easy to enjoy the sights. The snow and ice, however, create some very difficult driving and hiking. My girlfriend and I wanted to take a trail to see a waterfall about a mile and a half back from the road. The snow wasn't particularly deep, and the trail was marked "open," so we decided to try it, with little forethought about any risks involved.

The first part of the trail was easy—it was well-marked, and the snow was light. Other parts of the trail were steep. As we rounded a bend, we could see the waterfall in the distance. To my disappointment, however, a sign was posted, saying the trail was closed from that point on. I was determined this sign wasn't going to stop me from climbing to the top so I could look down the valley. We scanned ahead, and the trail looked simple, so we pressed on.

We just had rounded the next bend when I saw why the trail was closed. A section of natural stairs was built into the rock, leading to the top of the falls. Wet ice covered these stairs. Above were icicles the size of an average man. This sight was a little more daunting than the closure sign and chain, so we thought over our dilemma.

I had trekked the past hour and was pigheadedly determined to reach the top because I knew the view would be awesome. I also knew these steps were considerably more treacherous, and, even if I got up, getting down would be more difficult.

Edmund

I'm Not



Hillary,



Pausing to think only a minute, I decided to try it. I told my girlfriend to stay there, and she gladly obliged. I started up the stairs, holding onto the metal rail. My feet slipped out from under me several times, and I was left hanging onto the railing, but I made it to the top. I was winded but proud of my accomplishment. After snapping some pictures of the little speck that was my girlfriend from that height, I started back down.

As I had figured, the trip down the stairs was much harder than the ascent. Because my momentum already was downhill, every slip nearly pulled me down the entire flight of stairs. Thankfully, I made it to the bottom with nothing broken and only some bruises to my legs and ego.

Looking back, I made some bad decisions that day. I should have heeded the warning on the sign at the trailhead. “Closed” should mean just that. As I learned, there was a reason for that sign, even though I couldn’t see it from that spot.

Second, after I had bypassed the sign and made it to the icy stairs, I should have reassessed my initial decision. The view from the top, although inspiring, was not worth the risk of a broken bone or worse. My pride got the best of me this time—it forced me to say I was going to complete what I started, despite all the risk.

Third, I should have listened to my girlfriend, who obviously is much wiser than me. True, this story ended well, and it was a great learning experience, but it easily could have been different—pain, weeks of recuperation, and worse. I now remind myself that risk management is as important in our off-duty time as it is in our profession. ❏