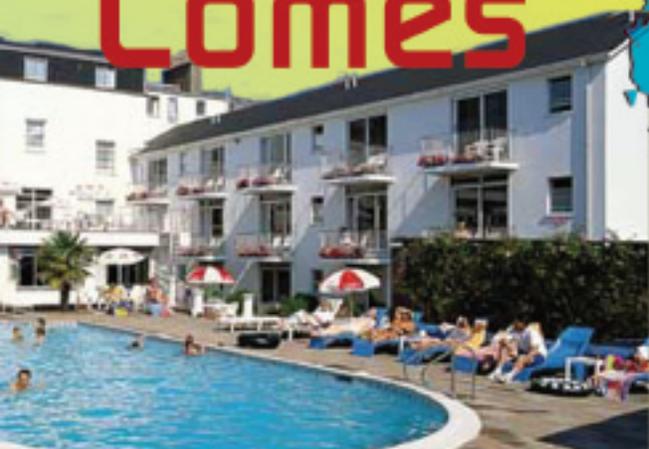


When the Party Comes



Coming to an End

By Ken Testorff,
Naval Safety Center

Hotel balconies are only as safe as the brick pillars holding the crosspieces in place. That's the costly lesson a group of Sailors learned during their ship's visit to a Mexican port.

The Sailors were part of deck department and had reserved several rooms at the hotel. They met at the pool bar and started socializing by drinking beer and shots of cognac. Witnesses said that after some time had passed, the alcohol consumption tapered off. Some horseplay followed, then a few of the Sailors returned to their hotel rooms to change clothing.

Three petty officers from deck department were standing on the balcony of their third-floor room, occasionally yelling to other shipmates at the pool. Everything was OK until all three simultaneously leaned against the wooden crosspiece of the balcony. One of the brick pillars broke, and the three tumbled over the side.

A PO1 died on the scene from a massive head injury when he hit the concrete-pool deck. A PO3 was knocked unconscious when he hit his head. He rolled into the pool, but some of the first people on the scene pulled him out and started CPR. They also tried to attend to a PO2, who shattered his right femur and injured his jaw. While conscious, though, he thrashed about so wildly from the pain that no one could help him. Eventually, he passed out, and treatment began.

At the time of this incident, a doctor from a local hospital was jogging on the beach and saw what happened. He was one of the first medical representatives on the scene. While someone called Shore Patrol and the chain of command, an ambulance took the PO2 and PO3 to a local hospital. They were treated in the emergency room, then moved to the intensive-care unit.

A CT scan revealed the PO3 had severe swelling in his brain. Doctors diagnosed him as critical, put him on a respirator, and started an IV to help reduce the swelling. The PO2's right femur was broken in five places, and, the following day, surgeons put a steel rod in his leg to repair the damage. When both Sailors had recovered enough, they were moved to regular hospital rooms.

Later, the PO3 complained he lacked movement in his right leg, so doctors took X-rays and learned he had a broken vertebra, for which they fitted him with a back brace. Nine days after the incident, both petty officers were discharged and transported back to military hospitals in the United States. After two days of testing, the PO3 was released. Doctors said he should have a full recovery. The PO2, however, required more leg surgery, and doctors had to immobilize his jaw. Physical therapy and rehabilitation for his right leg will take time, but his prognosis is very good.

Two factors contributed to this incident: structural failure and alcohol consumption. According to the mishap report, however, it appears the biggest factor was the structural failure. Even though all the Sailors had been drinking, the mishap board didn't feel the absence of alcohol would have prevented this incident. The report concluded with a warning to Sailors not to expect the same standards in building codes and structural integrity when they're outside the United States. ■