



# If You've Been Zapped, Did You Report It?

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**W**hen I attended my first Navy technical school, one of my instructors said, “A person who works with electricity and has never been zapped is either very lucky or extremely cautious.” My classmates and I looked at one another, knowing we either had already “been there” or knew someone who had. Getting a shock is nothing—walking away from one is what counts.

I got my first Navy “zap” during a sea-and-anchor detail when I was manning the fathometer. It was my responsibility to tell the bridge and combat information center (CIC) watchstanders how much water was beneath our keel. I also had to note the readings on a chart as a permanent record, in case the unthinkable happened and we ran aground.

The fathometer included an electric stylus, which burned a trace onto specialized paper to signify water depth at any given time. Imagine my horror when the stylus stuck, unable to continue its pass across the paper! I figured my job was to get the stylus moving, so I did the only thing I could think of: I reached out with my finger to nudge it. That was when I received my first Navy “zap.”

This wasn't the first time in my life I had been hit with electricity. (I had worked as a mechanic for seven years.) However, now I was responsible to a higher authority (the Navy), and that scared me. I needn't have worried, though. I was not the first to experience this jolt from the stylus. When confessing to my lack of safety protocol, I found myself in a Navy “fraternity.” I became privy to dozens of electrical-shock stories and legends, the worst involving a friend. He was maintaining a Louis Allis power supply, also known as LAPS. It produces the power to transmit sonar beyond 80,000 yards. Although he was unsure what exactly happened the day he got his first zap, he did recall being suddenly “transported” across a room. Although my friend was unhurt, his “flight” story was one of the zap “legends.”

During the next 12 years, I heard legends grow as though it was a contest to see whose zap story was most amazing. Every story had a close call, but the “hero” always walked away, and there was never a casualty.

I spoke with a master chief petty officer about his electrical “history” for this article, and he admitted he had once taken an electrical “hit.” Had he reported it? No!

I knew why not—no one wants to be perceived as an idiot by peers or superiors. That's only part of it. As the command's safety officer at several commands, I discovered there is required paperwork for reporting even minor incidents. When serious injury results, the subsequent investigation becomes a career unto itself.

With rare exception, shocks result from carelessness. Those working with electricity always should remember some basic do's and don'ts.

- Two hands complete a circuit. When taking voltage readings, use alligator clips and only one hand, if possible. Also wear electrical safety gloves.

- Communication is essential when performing tasks like tagout procedures or other processes involving more than one person.

- Working in wet areas always increases the likelihood of shock because water is a good conductor.

- The greatest threat facing those who daily work with electricity is their sense of comfort with it. After repeatedly working with electricity, they become procedurally lax and let memory guide them. They often forget the inherent dangers of working with electricity.

When a shock doesn't result in injury, consider it a “free” warning. Just because a particular zap doesn't injure or kill, don't think a similar future shock won't be fatal. Our greatest shortcoming is that by failing to report an electrical shock—however minor—we deny others the benefit of a warning that could save a life.

Every year, the Navy has hundreds of reported electrical shocks. Based on my experience, these pale when compared to actual occurrences, since many seemingly minor shocks remain unreported. One must ask, “If all zaps had been reported, how many subsequent mishaps and deaths could have been prevented over the years?”

Shock prevention and electrical-safety training in the uniformed services is among the best in the country, but to be effective, it must be taken seriously. Past mistakes must be incorporated into training curricula.

When working with electricity, remember the below safety hints.

- ✓ **It's not voltage that kills you**, but amperes (current).

- ✓ **Never work alone** and make sure your safety observer knows the location of emergency-cutoff switches for equipment on which you're working. Communication is paramount.

- ✓ **Never work on a live circuit** unless it is absolutely necessary and you have your CO's permission. Then follow all precautions and wear protective equipment.

- ✓ **Pay close attention to the safety training.** If it wouldn't be necessary, it wouldn't be given. Follow the rules.

- ✓ **Always report a shock.** You might save someone's life! ☺