



## Planning helps hunters hit safety bull's-eye

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A cracked leg bone was the only injury retired 1st Sgt. Aaron Daniels received when he fell from a tree in the Fort Polk, La., woods where he was hunting.

But while lying on a pile of wood, metal, leaves and assorted hunting equipment, he wondered how in the world he had ended up there.

Just a few moments earlier, the then-senior noncommissioned officer of an AH-64 Apache helicopter maintenance platoon had been sitting quietly in a tree stand positioned about 15 feet off the ground. With his bow and arrow ready, Daniels had been waiting patiently for a deer to emerge from the thick woods when his tree stand disintegrated around him.

"The stand broke, and it was so quick I didn't really know what was going on," Daniels said as he recounted the tale of his fall. "I was lying there, hurting all over, and I thought my legs were broken, and I didn't know if my back was broken."

After determining his arrows weren't stuck in him and his legs and back probably weren't broken, Daniels cautiously got to his feet and limped/crawled a half mile back to his truck. Because Daniels didn't have a cell phone with him, was hunting alone and had told no one where he'd be hunting, the slow trek back to the truck was the only way he was going to get out of the woods.

During an emergency room visit later that day, doctors told Daniels he'd sprained both ankles and knees and cracked a bone in his leg. Though his injuries were painful, Daniels still considers himself a lucky man.

"Most people who fall out of tree stands break their back or legs or end up in wheelchairs," he said.

Every year, millions of people just like Daniels venture into fields and forests around the United States seeking the "thrill" of a good hunt. A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service survey, conducted every five years, found that in 2006, 12.5 million people took 185 million hunting trips and spent nearly \$23 billion on their chosen sport.

Counted among the millions whose eyes are set on everything from big bucks to wild hogs are thousands of Soldiers and their Family members. While Soldiers and hunting seem like a

perfect match and the number of recent Soldier hunting-related accidents is relatively low, the potential for serious injury, like Daniels' broken leg, still exists. During the past three years, three Soldiers were seriously injured while hunting and one had minor injuries. The three serious injuries involved an accidental discharge, carbon monoxide poisoning and a clothing fire. The minor injury occurred when a Soldier fell from a tree stand.

"Over the last few decades, hunting has become one of the safest sports in America," said Bill Zaharis, veteran hunter and executive director of U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center Future Operations.

However, Zaharis said some hunters fail to plan for basic scenarios.

"In today's age of GPS, you wouldn't think it would be easy to become lost or disoriented, but it does happen and can lead to risky situations depending on the environment," Zaharis said. "One common scenario occurs when a hunter scouts his hunting area during the day but doesn't consider how the approach and departure routes to the stand might look during darkness. There are many discreet trail marking aids to help provide a clear path to and from your stand without alerting every other hunter to your favorite spot."

Another problem occurs when a hunter successfully takes the game animal he or she is after but doesn't have a plan to recover it from the woods, he said.

"After taking the celebratory pictures and thanking the creator for your success isn't the time to realize you have a mile-long trek and no means for transporting the quarry," Zaharis said. "Think through game recovery prior to going afield, and ensure you have a friend or two you can count on to help you search or recover your game."

The National Forest Service advises hunters to always tell someone where they will be hunting and avoid hunting alone; check the weather forecast, dress properly and be prepared for the worst possible weather conditions; wear enough blaze orange to be highly visible to other hunters; check hunting equipment before and after each hunt and maintain it properly; never carry a loaded weapon in a vehicle or while riding a four-wheeler, crossing a fence or climbing a tree; and always identify the target before shooting.

Daniels acknowledged he did several things wrong the day he fell from his tree stand, including failing to tell anyone where he was hunting, hunting alone, failing to notice several "stress cracks" in his tree stand and failing to wear his tree stand safety harness. The avid hunter said he learned some important lessons that day, lessons he passes on to other hunters as often as he can.

He said soon after he recovered from his fall and "worked up the courage to get back in a tree stand," he watched his buddy slip and fall while climbing into a tree stand because he wasn't wearing a safety harness.

Daniels said hunters should check their tree stands thoroughly for defects or other problems and use a safety harness.

"A lot of people go out early to hunt and while they're waiting for their prey, they fall asleep and fall from their tree stands," he said. "The harness will keep them from falling."

Daniels and Zaharis encourage every hunter, whether they are new to the sport or have been doing it for years, to attend hunter education classes offered by Family, Morale, Welfare and Recreation Outdoor Recreation teams at most Army installations throughout the country.

“Hunter education and mentorship programs have had a tremendous positive impact on reducing tragic accidents,” Zaharis said. “Hunters love to tell stories about their adventures, and passing along positive safety tips is a critical element in keeping our sport viable.”

Today, Daniels is retired and instructs the hunter education course at Fort Campbell, Ky. He estimates that he’s offered hunting safety tips to hundreds of Soldiers and Family members over the years and is happy to know there’s a whole generation of Army hunters who are safer because of the lessons he’s shared.

“Safety is at the heart of every good hunting trip,” Daniels said. “Passing this knowledge to others and helping keep them from harm and injury makes me feel like I’m doing some good in this world. I sleep better at night knowing that I get to help others stay safe.”

For more information on hunting safety, visit the National Forest Service website at [www.fs.fed.us](http://www.fs.fed.us) or the International Hunter Education Association website at [www.ihea.com](http://www.ihea.com). More information on hunting and many other fall and winter safety topics is available online at <https://safety.army.mil> under the Fall/Winter Safety Campaign tab.