

Safety on the Set with Firearms

The late Lt. Col. Jeff Cooper is credited with four firearm safety rules that everyone who handles a firearm must know and live by. All professional armorers or firearms instructors use these exact same rules to keep everyone safe on the set or on the range. The beauty of these four rules is that you must break more than one of them before you find yourself in a dangerous situation. Firearms cannot fire by themselves. A loaded firearm laying on the table cannot fire or hurt anyone until it has been touched or picked up. Firearms can be dangerous, as Jeff Cooper said “if they were not dangerous they would be useless to us”.

A movie prop gun is usually a real gun that is modified to fire blanks. A blank firing prop is still dangerous because it has explosive powder in the cartridge but no bullet. Each time you fire a blank it's a small controlled explosion with fire and flame flying out the barrel that can travel approximately 20 feet. A movie prop semi auto pistol will fire with each pull of the trigger until the blank ammunition is exhausted. This requires that the barrel is modified with a partial plug so the burning powder will generate enough gas pressure to cycle the prop or load the next blank. If you loaded a real bullet in semi auto prop gun it would explode like a small grenade. This is why movie prop guns are so expensive because you have to destroy the real gun to fire blanks so it can never fire a real bullet. In the case of a movie prop revolver this conversion is not necessary to fire blanks because a revolver must be cocked by pulling back the hammer or squeezing the trigger for the next shot. A revolver can be a little more dangerous on set because the revolver can still fire a real bullet. A revolver must be checked for any barrel obstruction before loading blanks so that any obstruction will not be blown out of the barrel by firing the blank.

The best way to describe an unintentional discharge is when the gun fires as a result of failing to follow the safety rules. Whether through conscious or reckless disregard of the consequences of one's acts the gun fired while in your possession. There are four simple rules that apply to all firearms. These rules come from the hard lessons we learn in life. Short of a mechanical failure if you live by these rules you will never have a dangerous unintentional discharge.

#1. All guns are always loaded.

If you treat all guns as if they are loaded you are less likely to do foolish or stupid things with them. You must check the gun yourself and if you don't know how then you shouldn't be handling the gun.

#2. Never point the muzzle at anything your not willing to destroy.

With handguns it is very easy to cross someone with the muzzle. On a one way range we call this breaking the 180 and doing so will have you excused from the range. You must think of the muzzle as a red laser and pointing it at someone or some thing you don't want to shoot is breaking the rules.

#3. Keep your finger outside the trigger guard until your sights are on target.

It's completely natural to put your finger on the trigger and doing so tells everyone you have not been trained in the use of firearms. Keep your finger off the trigger until your sights are on target and you have made the decision to shoot.

#4. Know your target and what is behind it.

On the range this is very easy because we have a dirt berm or backstop. On the set this is difficult because if your shooting blanks at the camera you still have crew nearby. Special precaution should be taken such as a remote camera or a safety visor for the crew to keep everyone safe.

So we know that firearms can be deadly, therefore you must treat all firearms with the respect they deserve. This means that being complacent is dangerous and one simple mistake could lead to serious injury or even death. We don't need more rules to be safe, we need experience and common sense and I promise you that if you will implement these four rules you will never have an unintentional discharge and be the cause of a dangerous situation on the set.

Steve Parker, Armorer

Steve Parker is a retired Deputy Sheriff with 26 years in law enforcement and part time at the local gun store for 30 years. He always wanted a job that would pay him to play with firearms. He is a Utah POST Certified Firearms instructor, Patrol rifle instructor, Range Master, Life member of the NRA, Life member of USPSA and holds two certifications in Real Estate as a Certified Shopping Center Manager (CSM) and Certified Property Manager (CPM). Steve loves exploring the mountain trails in a RZR with his family and lives outside Salt Lake City, UT