Taxiing Our W

by Lt. John Smolen

I signed for an airplane for what was to be the simplest of missions: Fly, code aboard, VFR at 1,000 feet, an arduous straight and level flight from point A to point B along the Tyrrhenian Coast near Naples, Italy. It was a beautiful day. We had two qualified aircraft commanders and two qualified crew chiefs aboard for what was usually a benign, "bread and butter" executive-transport flight.

Typical obstacles to a seamless flight include lousy weather, impatient VIPs, and language barriers with ATC. I was about to discover another one. And I certainly didn't think I would have the fodder for an *Approach* article so soon in the day.

Prior to shutting down during the second half of the event, we had noted that our tailwheel wasn't locking into place. Our airframers manipulated the tailwheel until it locked. When we started up, we engaged the head and proceeded onward into the taxi checklist. I signaled the plane captain to remove chocks and landing gear pins, looked down to the checklist, looked up again, and saw a thumbs up.

That's what I thought I had seen, anyway. It turned out that the plane captain had been giving a signal for a stuck pin, starboard side. To give this signal, he grasped his index and middle finger on one hand with the other. His signal was correct, but his thumb was absently sticking up—the false thumbs up that I thought I saw. Thinking all was proceeding according to plan, I cleared my side (port side), seeing one aircrewman with chocks over his shoulder and a "remove before flight" flag flapping from one of the pins in his hand.

Continuing the checklist, I told my copilot to unlock the tailwheel, wait for our crew to climb aboard, and call ready for taxi. She had recog-

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nized the stuck-pin signal from the plane captain and had released the parking brake (an H-3 trick for unsticking a stuck pin) and had also complied with my call for unlocking the aircraft tailwheel.

Here's where disaster loomed. The crew chief was underneath the starboard sponson, trying to unseat the landing-gear pin, when my copilot released the brakes. The aircraft began to taxi about the chocked right mainmount, because of the inertia in the head. I noticed we were pivoting right, glanced at the confused plane captain, and promptly asked my copilot to apply the brakes. She was a step ahead of me. It wasn't the best time to note that the brake was "mushy," and it took a few extra fractions of a second to build enough pressure on that brake to stop the aircraft. The crewman on the starboard side had gotten clear when he noticed the aircraft moving. The helicopter had rotated about 10 to 15 degrees to the right and up onto the chocks that were still inserted on the starboard side.

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We chocked the port side and gathered the crew on ICS to talk about what had happened. On the recommendation of another senior aircrewman present for the launch, I signaled for a lift to lighten the pressure on the starboard side chock. That way, the ground crew could work it free, instead of having to forcibly remove the chock with the full weight of the aircraft on it. After the chock was removed, we regrouped and gathered our senses. Then, with the aircraft chocked, pinned, and tailwheel locked, we started over on the taxi checklist and eventually completed the mission.

At the end of the day, we gathered the entire launch crew and aircraft crew to collect all the perspectives on what had happened during those few moments of a botched taxi. We discovered a few things and drew a few conclusions.

Some of the ground crew thought that when the plane captain signals to unlock the tailwheel, it doesn't actually unlock until the aircraft starts taxiing. This misconception is what gave the crewman under the right sponson a sense of security while freeing the stuck pin. In actuality, the tailwheel is unlocked as soon as the pilot activates the handle in the cockpit, so the pilot in the right seat will have full control of the aircraft and won't need to swap controls to unlock the tailwheel.

The plane captain hadn't immediately responded when he noticed something out of the ordinary. He should have used standard NATOPS hand signals and immediately taken control of the situation. From his perspective, he hadn't given a "chocks and pins removed" thumbs up, so it took a little while to figure out that the pilots had recognized it as such. These critical fractions of a second accounted for the 10 to 15 degrees of pivot and a right mainmount balancing on top of a chock.

The most important lesson was for me. Just a few more words with the copilot would have prevented this situation. Despite having thought I'd seen a "thumbs up," I hadn't asked her if she could see her crewman with the chock prior to directing that the tailwheel be unlocked.

After our meeting, I reflected on the breakdown in ACT among our crew and the launch crew. We had witnessed an instantaneous and critical lapse in communication, situational awareness, and, most importantly, leadership (on my part, as the aircraft commander). ACT applies anytime you work with other people toward a common goal. Our goal as a launch crew and aircrew was to taxi safely. We almost didn't.

Lt. Smolen flies with HC-2.