



Wrong

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I've been a hands-on type of guy my whole life. My father always told me, "The world is an easier place to live in if you understand how things work." He associated an ability to use common sense with any mechanical project we attempted.

Dad emphasized the importance of being safe and using the right tools for a job—his garage always had gloves, goggles and jackstands. I never thought the day would come when I'd ignore the respect for hand tools he had stressed so much, but I was mistaken.

I still remember that gloomy Saturday morning in Queens, N.Y. I was 17 years old and had managed to save enough money to buy my dream car: a rusty 1969 Mustang convertible. Unfortunately, I didn't have enough money left for the brake job I knew the car needed after I had driven it for two weeks. I decided to do the job myself—after all, I was familiar with the procedures. I bought the necessary parts and headed to a two-car garage my father had rented about five miles from the house. He kept all his tools and the family's 1968 Mustang coupe in this garage.

In my eagerness to get started, I had left the keys to the family Mustang at home. Rather than drive back and get the keys, I decided to squeeze my car beside the other one. An air compressor and a tool chest were in the way, though, so I could get only half my car inside. The other half stuck out into a narrow road that led to the main street.

Undaunted, I jacked up my car, positioned the jackstands, and removed all four wheels—completely forgetting Dad always had told me to do one spindle at a time. "I know what I'm doing," I kept saying to myself, unaware of the danger ahead. I couldn't find the tool Dad and I had designed to remove the rear springs holding the brake shoes in place, so I grabbed a screwdriver. A loud bell should have gone off in my head, but it didn't—or, if it did, I didn't hear it. As a result, I ignored Dad's advice to "use the proper tool for the job." Perhaps I was determined—or destined—to learn my lesson the hard way.

Five minutes into the job, I had trouble with the screwdriver jamming between a spring and the stud that held it in place. I was kneeling—without wearing goggles—when the spring released, and the screwdriver flew at me. As I stood up, I felt warm blood running down my face, and my right eye was tearing so badly I couldn't see. I fought to keep my composure as I looked for a mirror, sorted things out, and tried to come up with a plan. During this time, I could feel the right side of my face swelling, and it had started aching, so I knew I probably should head to the nearest hospital. Because no one was around to help me, and my car had no wheels or brakes, I looked for a telephone but couldn't find one.

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I decided to knock on the back door of the house belonging to the lady who had rented the garage to my dad. The shocked expression on her face when she answered the door made me panic. When I finally looked in a mirror, I saw about a one-inch gash between the bridge of my nose and my right eye. The injury was so deep my tear duct was exposed and was hanging like a piece of thread. What was I going to do? I couldn't drive my car, and I couldn't close the garage door because half of my car was sticking into the street. All I

needed now was for a piano to fall on my head.

I decided to call my grandfather, and he got in touch with my uncle, who finished the brake job. It took two hours but I at last got to a hospital, where I waited several more hours in the emergency room. The doctor told me I was lucky—if the screwdriver had hit about an eighth-inch higher, I probably would have lost my right eye. The thought of wearing an eye patch for the rest of my life wasn't com-



forting. I couldn't believe I had come so close to permanently disabling myself.

In the year that followed, I joined the Navy and became a jet-engine mechanic. I came to know a lot of people with interesting stories about how they had been injured at some point in their lives. The truth is that none of the stories hit home harder than the ones involving a permanent injury,

which resulted in a release from the service. Being in the maintenance field most of my adult life, I've seen everything from black eyes to broken hands and fingers. The bottom line was the same 99 percent of the time: The injured person was using the wrong tool for the job, or he wasn't following good maintenance practices.

Twelve years have passed, but every time I look in a mirror, I still see that one-inch scar under my right eye, reminding me of my mistake. Many times since that experience, I've heard the warning bell in the back of my head sound, and I've always listened to it.

I learned a valuable lesson that day long ago: Tools are designed for specific purposes, and they serve us well when we use them correctly. Poor planning, not following procedures, and misusing a common hand tool were contributing factors in a mishap that nearly caused me to lose vision in one eye.

Using tools safely is a universal concept that applies at work and at home. The next time you're sitting in a safety lecture, pay attention. It might prevent you from having to tell a story like mine one day. **A**

The author was assigned to VFA-83 when he wrote this article.

Unlike the do-it-yourselfer in the story, this technician has enough room and all the tools he needs to do a brake job right.