

Fingers: Flexible, Handy... and Fragile

By AM2 Marc Michot

When I first came to the airframes shop, I felt uneasy about working on aircraft. I usually would tag along with other people and hold their flashlights, hand them tools, or watch their tool-boxes while they fixed the jets. But after a few months, I would dive deep into whatever needed to be done. After being successful on certain tasks, I started to become more confident that I was ready for more difficult kinds of jobs.

I had been in the airframe shop for five months and had put on second-class two months earlier. I felt a gap existed between my rank and my technical knowledge. I wanted to expose myself to all sorts of major maintenance to narrow this gap, so I would volunteer for any task that I hadn't done before.

At the time of my mishap, I was working nights. The port and starboard component on the upper side brace of an FA-18C needed to be replaced. I told my supervisor that a shipmate and I would take care of it. My co-worker kept telling me that replacing the component was easy and would be no big deal. I never had done it before, but he had changed this part plenty of times. Our plan was for him to replace the starboard component, and I would watch each step and then repeat it on the port side. The tough book was open to the work package and was on the deck between us.

I watched him start his side and then broke the safety wire and removed some bolts on my side (copying his steps). I looked back at his side for further instruction. He was working very quickly. He pointed to the bolt that was the next to be removed. I returned back to the port side and broke the torque on the bolt. It wasn't a very big bolt—only slightly larger than my index finger. I removed the nut and pushed the bolt back out of the hole with my finger. The bolt slid out smoothly and hit the deck. Immediately, the side brace folded slightly, the landing gear shifted inboard, and I felt my finger get pinched.

The weight that the bolt supported, combined with the sharp and metallic edges of the bolthole, was enough to cleanly shear off my fingertip. I wasn't sure how much had been cut off because so much blood was



gushing out. I yelled for my shipmate, and he immediately saw my serious injury. I already was in a state of shock.

My co-worker told my supervisor, while someone else found the tip of the finger and brought it to me. My supervisor escorted me into maintenance control. The maintenance chief looked at me as I held up my bloody left hand and clutched my fingertip in a piece of cheesecloth with my right hand. We immediately were sent to medical, and a surgeon operated that same night. I ended up losing about a quarter-inch of my left index finger halfway down the fingernail, along with the tip of the bone.

I wish I could go back to that night. The accident easily could have been avoided. Obviously, I should have used a punch or a screwdriver to push the bolt. Even though the job was fairly simple, I should have taken time to watch my shipmate do one side completely. He then could have watched me do my side. I got so absorbed in how to remove the component that I allowed myself to forget why the bolt was there and what would happen when it was removed. The punishment for my negligence was very painful and irreversible. 🦋

Petty Officer Michot worked in the airframes shop at VFA-83 when this story was written.