

Hoist Operations Gon

By AT3(AW) Karen Hemenway

I work night check as an EA-6B Prowler AN/ALQ-99 tactical jamming system technician aboard USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower*. A typical shift on an aircraft carrier in the Navy is very difficult to explain but mine started out just like any typical night, but it ended up with an incredible lesson.

Often throughout each deployment, the EA-6B squadron needs something out of the mezzanine, which on the ship is located on the 02 level in the forward section of hangar bay No. 1. Reconfiguring transmitters for various missions is norm for the O-level guys. Since we keep the transmitters and the PODs in the mezzanine, it means we spend one or two hours a night issuing and receiving the transmitters and PODs from the squadron.

We must use a hoist to lower these items from the mezzanine to the hangar bay deck.

On any given hoist operation, four to six people are required: a qualified hoist operator, at least two traffic-control personnel (who can be omitted when roping off the area), one line handler (two if it's a big item), one safety checker, and someone to assist the hoist operator.

That fateful night I was the hoist operator. We had all the other appropriate personnel in place and had secured the area with ropes. We had just finished bringing up three or four transmitters and one POD when everything went wrong.

The mezzanine is a storage area two stories above the hangar bay deck. That's pretty high for something



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to fall, so safety is paramount. The mezzanine is set up with two areas to raise and lower gear. One is at the aft end of the space with a platform type catwalk so you can walk out far enough to follow the hoist as its being chained out there. The other area we like to call the “hell hole.” It’s an oblong hole, approximately six feet wide by 30 feet long, reaching all the way down into the hangar bay. Access to it is gained from a balcony coming from one of the shops. All around the edge of the hole in the mezzanine are stanchions with three heavy ropes to keep people from falling.

We used to have wonderful, wide, flat pieces of metal on the ends of every rail that would lift on contact with another end piece of rail, which we used as stops for the hoist. They were replaced with weaker versions

that locked together—better in one way but worse because it won’t stop a hoist.

I was coming across from the port side to the starboard, getting ready for another POD. My assistant was helping me lock and unlock the rails, getting them lined up and ready for hoisting. The stanchions were up but control cables along with the pneumatic air hose were getting caught on them. I thought to myself that there must be a better way to do this. It’s such a pain! Trying to keep the cables and hose free from the stanchions was not what I was supposed to be doing. A split in the rails exists over the hellhole so they can be moved forward and aft. I wasn’t looking at the split, and I definitely should have been paying very close attention to that spot.



only for a high pitched “No!” I swear it wasn’t a scream. I don’t care if I am a girl, it wasn’t a scream and I’ll deny it ’til the day I die.

My world narrowed to the air hose, which had been draped over the side of the hole. It was wrapping around my shoulders because of the position of the hoist before it went over. Everything happened so quickly. In milliseconds, I knew if I didn’t move the hose, it would be going over the side with the hoist, safety ropes or not. I don’t remember throwing the controller, but I’ll take my assistant’s word for it. I do, however, remember seeing the air hose tightening around me as I was running out of slack. I grabbed the hose with both hands and spun left. The hose went up

I didn’t see the split coming, but I suddenly looked up at the rail. Was it a larger “thunk” than normal? Or did I finally realize the split was coming up? Or did my assistant warn me? I just don’t remember, but I looked up at the hoist at that specific moment, simultaneously letting go of the trigger that propels the hoist in that direction. I noticed the hoist was about three quarters of the way off the hoist rail. Had I been asked at that moment if I thought it possible for that situation to occur, I would have told you hands down, “No way.” I could feel my heart stop for a second because I knew something bad was going to happen.

Instinct kicked in, but I wish it hadn’t. I tried to get the hoist back up. I wish I had left it alone and stayed very still until I had time to yell down and tell everyone to get out of the way. Or by some miracle, we could have tied it up or gotten a net or something under it. But I already had made a bad choice.

A sprocket keeps the hoist lined up on the rail itself, and the movement of the sprocket in one direction or another is also what propels the hoist in that direction. The sprocket had come off the chain groove. It still moves, though, even if it’s not on the rail. The movement it made when I attempted to reverse actually was enough to push it just far enough to allow it to drop. No, plummet is more like it.

There was no time to call out, “Heads up!” or, “Move” or, “There is a 300-pound hoist about to drop on your heads shipmates, please be careful!” I had time

and over my head and over the side. I took the two steps back to the edge to see the rest of the fall. The hoist hit a piece of SE, bounced and fell three more feet to the deck of the hangar bay. As I leaned out over the side, I didn’t see a body, blood, crushed helmets, or anyone screaming in pain...all the things I feared. I suddenly couldn’t stand up anymore, so I sat down and shook for two hours.

The moral and lesson in my story is to make sure you follow every safety precaution. We did that in several ways: nobody was standing under the hoist, no foot traffic was in the area because of the safety ropes, and nobody got hurt. It’s important to challenge people when safety is concerned. I’d rather take a butt chewing than have someone squished under a 300-pound hoist, 820-pound POD, or even hit in the face with a guide rope. I also wish the new equipment had safety stops. They would have helped. ●●●

Petty Officer Hemenway works as a Shop 11 technician aboard USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN-69).

According to the ship, the hoist and rail stops were not correctly sized to align and meet, preventing the hoist from traveling off the end of the rail. Steel plates larger than the existing stops were manufactured and installed on the hoist. A Hazardous Material Report was submitted on the hoist and rail, notifying the hoist program office and NAVAIR of a possible design issue and to alert other activities of this potential hazard.—Ed.