

The Day I Got Hooked

By AMAA Jonathon Swafford

A typical day during workups is not vastly different than any other workday, but this time I left work at noon, in an ambulance, and was granted four days of convalescent leave.

The day began as usual: I came in, got into my coveralls, started pre-ops, did FOD walkdown, and went over the day's pass down that included a list of tasks we needed to do. I started removing panels and helped my shipmates do some of their jobs. All of it was in a normal day's work.

In the afternoon, one of our AM3s asked me to help him remove the tail bumper on one of our aircraft, and, since I was new in the shop, I was a prime candidate for odd jobs. He was fairly familiar with the procedure, having worked on the acceptance of seven jets in the past six months and all of them "up jets" after their first check flight. The pub simply says to "remove the tail bumper," so we checked out the toolbox and other tools that were required to do the job and headed for the hangar bay.

Our job was to remove the tail-hook bumper spring that retracts the hook. It started off right, and everything was running smoothly. Any doubt I had about the safety of the evolution disintegrated. We were close to the end of the job; one of the last steps is to loosen the bolts that hold the spring to the jet. This spring is under some tension, and it is much easier to remove it if someone applies pressure in the opposite direction. By adding pressure, we thought we would decrease the chance of the bumper popping back and flying across the hangar bay, damaging something or injuring someone.

As I was holding onto the spring, the AM3 was loosening the bolt, when it came loose and popped back into my hand, hooked end first. At the time, I did not realize the hook had gone into the bottom of my ring finger, through the webbing, and through my pinkie finger, nearly coming out the side of my hand.

Luckily, the AM3 was able to remove the hook from the other side and got me into the shop for help as fast as he could. I was moved to maintenance control where paramedics showed up, bandaged my entire hand, and then rushed me to the ER.



I learned a few lessons from this evolution. First, you always need to look at the pubs for the job you are going to do. In this case, it just says "remove the tail hook bumper" with no particular instructions or cautions about how to relieve the tension on the spring. We knew from experience it would be under tension, but the amount of force was unexpected.

If you know a procedure raises safety questions, but no cautions are associated with it, you should send a recommended change to the safety officer. Since we had done quite a few acceptances, we knew what we were up against and could have submitted a change earlier. PPE isn't required for this job, but it could have been had we submitted the change. Also, if you don't feel safe about a procedure, you should speak up.

The last point is that we had lax conditions. We had looked at the pub and done this procedure many times, but this familiarity caused us to go through the motions instead of really briefing what might happen. Had I thought of these things, it could have saved me a ride to the hospital. 🚑

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