

# The “A” Panel That Didn’t Stay Forgotten

By AD1 Aaron G. Beckman, VP-26

While deployed to NAS Sigonella, Sicily, I was assigned as CDI for a team that was preparing for a “Man on the Stand”—a P-3 engine-maintenance turn. We were trying to isolate an oil leak that had been undetectable through previous post-turn inspections.

We started our checklist, which shows all the required steps to prepare an aircraft for this job. While cleaning the outboard side of the engine, I decided to do a little extra and removed the aft “A” panel, resting it flat on top of the wing. Before my shipmates and I could finish the clean-up job, rain began pouring down. We rapidly secured the B-4 stands, checked tools, and cleaned up the area to wait out the down-pour. By the time we returned to the task, I had forgotten about the “A” panel.

After an hour, the ground was sufficiently dry, and we performed our safety brief in maintenance control. The pilot, FE, QA, and yellowshirt reported to the aircraft, along with three members from the powerplants workcenter. No one—including the QA rep—noticed the outboard “A” panel wasn’t attached during the safety walk-arounds. The QA rep checked the forward nose ICS, and we were ready to start engines.

With the No. 3 engine running, two CDIs went up on the B-4 stands to inspect for leaks. They took about 10 minutes to do the inspection and found the leak coming from the engine-breather line. They decided the engine no longer was serviceable, stepped off the B-4 stand, and walked to the end of the wing. Everything was going well until I saw what made my heart skip a beat. The maintenance officer and maintenance master chief were standing in the hangar bay watching this evolution and felt the same shock.

The “A” panel I had set on top of the wing took flight when the FE shifted down the No. 3 engine into low RPM, which had launched it about 50 feet aft of the wing. Sparks flew as it slid another 20 feet. After a



close inspection by one of the airframe CDIs, we determined the panel hadn’t been damaged significantly, but I couldn’t say the same for my self-esteem.

The maintenance manual contains no cautions against setting panels on the wing during preflight; however, there is an instruction to inspect upper wing surfaces for FOD hazards before performing turns. A qualified pilot, QA representative, flight engineer, CDI, and a yellowshirt all had overlooked the panel I left on top of the wing; each of us failed to use our checklist.

The “Man on the Stand” engine turn is one of the most dangerous maintenance tasks we perform. Adhering to the checklist is imperative for the safety of all involved and for personnel in the vicinity. The rain during our work had caused several stoppages, which induced dangerous gaps in our process and opened the door wide for human error. If we only had said, “Let’s start a new checklist from the beginning,” this incident might have been avoided. 🦋