



# Tailhook Trounces Toes

By AM3 Brian Moore

**I**t was a typical mid-cruise day in the North Arabian Sea. The weather was hot and humid, with only the occasional hurricane of jet blast and a steady 30-knot wind over the deck to “cool” things off. We needed to change the up-lock mechanism on the tailhook of aircraft 207, and we then had to do an op-check on the hook to make sure it was safe for flight. This job may sound simple, but it turned into a nightmare.

The tailhook dashpot puts positive pressure on the hook to keep it from skipping over the wires on touch-down and had been drained for the up-lock change. The dashpot normally is not reserviced immediately, and the hook is dropped manually before we apply hydraulic power to the jet. This step keeps the hook from slamming to the deck and possibly chipping a good hook point; however, this time, we decided to service the dashpot before we dropped the hook.

After servicing the dashpot, I went under the aircraft with another AM3 to drop the hook. I’m still not sure why, but I thought I could hold the hook on the way down to keep it from slamming the deck. After solidly putting my shoulder beneath the hook, I told my squadronmate to disengage the up-lock. The hook came down, and, as it moved, I lost my grip and watched as 800 pounds of dashpot pressure slammed down the Tomcat’s tailhook point. Much to my surprise, it didn’t crash to the flight deck. It hit with a thud. And it didn’t take long for me to realize it was because my foot was in the way!

I could feel the pain as the steel toe of my boot crushed into my toenails. As quickly as possible, we raised the tailhook by hand, and I pulled out my foot.

I never thought I would be the man down that often is called over the ship’s 1MC, but I was. I tried walking toward the other side of the aircraft, but other flight-deck people came over to help. They took me to flight-deck medical, where a Corpsman decided to cut off my boot. As they pulled the crushed leather aside, I was ready for the worst. I was surprised and relieved to see all my toes still were attached. The steel toe of my work boots had prevented a 70-pound tailhook under pressure from coming down all the way and completely crushing my foot. I got off lucky; I had only a broken toe, a torn toenail, and several bruises.

What did I learn from this experience? I should have followed procedures. The safety chain would not have been broken had I done the steps in the right order. Always be cautious around moving aircraft parts, even if you’re the person working on those items. A momentary lapse in judgment quickly can lead to trouble. Finally, always wear your personal protective equipment. At the very least, it’ll save your toes.

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This foot wasn’t a match for a 70-pound tailhook under 800 pounds of pressure.