

An Uplifting Experience

in the **Hot** Pits

By AN Travis Stillions

How many times do you hear, “Safety is the most important factor when working on or around aircraft?” And how many times, when you are feeling a “sense of urgency,” do you take the time to evaluate all the hazards? Despite my exposure to working with jet aircraft on a daily basis, I recently failed to recognize one of these hazards as it developed. I inadvertently placed myself in danger, and an alert shipmate saved me from harm.

My incident occurred while on detachment to Mountain Home AFB, Idaho, with my EA-6B Prowler squadron, VAQ-134. During two weeks of



training, we performed several “hot pit” evolutions, which are carried out after an aircraft returns from a flight and requires more fuel for an immediate follow-on flight.

Prowlers taxi through the hot-brake area to check the wheels and to secure the starboard engine. The aircraft then taxis into an area next to the fueling hose and needs to be grounded before the fueling hose is attached. Throughout the fueling process, the port engine keeps turning. Upon completion of the refueling, the aircraft taxis to another area to change the flight crew and to reconfigure for the next flight.

I had little experience with the “hot pit” evolution before this training detachment, but I quickly became comfortable with the process. This time, as a Prowler approached from the hot-brake area, the ground crew took their places. I waited patiently as the plane captain taxied the aircraft toward us and commanded the pilot to halt the aircraft. The starboard engine had been secured, but the port motor was turning.

With the plane chocked, I approached the port boarding ladder, removed the grounding strap, and proceeded to ground the aircraft. Knowing that the aircrew was waiting to take off as soon as we finished, I hurried to unwind the tangled grounding strap to expedite the fueling. Kneeling down, I reached forward, toward the attachment point in the nose wheelwell. Suddenly, I felt my

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jacket lifted up by the suction from the intake. It happened very quickly, and, by the time I realized my mistake, a fellow ground crewman had reacted and pulled me to safety.

Upon reflection, I remembered watching the video of a trainee being sucked into an A-6E port engine intake, demonstrating the reason for avoiding the inlet danger areas around aircraft. Despite having that graphic image lodged in my memory, I somehow forgot those danger areas.

I wasn't injured, but the situation could have played out very differently. In

addition to highlighting hazard-area avoidance, this incident taught me another valuable lesson: Under no circumstances should you allow yourself to become complacent while working around aircraft. The hair on the back of your neck should stand up whenever an aircraft's engines are turning and you need to work in the immediate vicinity.

As my maintenance officer told me during my check-in, “Nothing we do warrants losing a person or an asset. Safety is my most important concern.” This event was a vivid reminder of how important safety is on the job and will continue to be in my Navy career. 🍀

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Recognizing the similarities between a real-life event and an incident shown on videotape during training indicates that the safety training was on the right track. However, you still have to apply the lessons learned, whenever you go to work.
—Ed.

