

No Excuses for a Lax Attitude

By AD2 Mark Soto

We started the day just like any other aboard Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan, with a maintenance meeting, FOD walkdown and combat flight ops. We all know that deployment life is one filled with hard work and minimal play. We were only one month into our deployment, and already the vigorous schedule was starting to wear on us—complacency was beginning to set in. This story relays how a simple drop-tank removal, done carelessly, resulted in a mishap that easily could have caused serious injury.

About mid-morning, a member of the corrosion work center asked me, as power plants LPO, to download two 300-gallon drop-tanks from the “hangar queen.” Without much thought, and in an effort to help out my shipmates, I agreed. What I should have asked myself was, “Why is corrosion directly tasking the power plants shop to do maintenance?” This statement should have been my first clue that maintenance

control knew nothing of the intended tank removal because no MAF had been issued for the job.

I asked my Sailors to go ahead and check out all the tools they would need for the job. I also should have made sure they were clear on what they were going to do. Of course, they left the shop without a drop-tank checklist. So one second class, one third class, and three airmen walked out of the shop...sounds like the start of a good bar joke. But there’s no joking around when it comes to the absence of common sense and ORM.

They proceeded to the jet to remove the drop-tanks, and the supervisor observing them asked if anyone had checked the tank for fuel. He proceeded to open the fuel cap to verify the tank was empty, and it was safe to release. The tank was dropped, and the supervisor walked over to corrosion work center to help them prepare paint for an upcoming job. During this

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and had complete confidence in their ability to do this simple task correctly. Unfortunately, I was mistaken.

I was ready to sign off the oil-pressure gripe when one of the airmen assigned to the job flew into the shop screaming, “We just released the other drop-tank, and it still was full of fuel.” We immediately ran to the clamshell and located all the Sailors involved, making sure they were all OK. In complete shock, I grimaced as I looked at the scene. On the deck sat a 300-gallon, 2,000-pound drop-tank that had been full of TS-1 fuel. It now was in front of me and gushing profusely from where it had split open. The base hazmat team was quick to

time, the rest of the drop-tank crew moved to the other drop-tank. Assuming it was empty, like the previous one, and believing it had been checked, they positioned themselves around the tank to grab it when released from the rack.

I was in the shop helping one of my CDIs sign off an oil-pressure gripe just completed on aircraft 523. Since the jet was getting ready to fly, it was my priority. I wasn’t able to supervise the tank download, but we had removed and replaced countless tanks in the recent past. My shop always had strived to do things by the book. I trusted they knew how to do the job

respond, and the spill was contained with minimal impact; however, the incident easily could have injured or killed one of my Sailors as it fell to the deck from a height of more than 4 feet.

Fortunately, no one was hurt, but the shop and squadron learned a valuable lesson about what happens when complacency gets in the way of sound judgment and procedures. I learned you can’t take anything for granted and must do an ORM review before every task. ✦

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