

When Fingers Get in the Way

By AT2 Jacob Kauffman

On a normal day during the strike group's tailored ships training availability on board USS *John C. Stennis* (CVN-74), I made a mistake that landed me 14 days of convalescent leave and almost cost me a finger and part of my hand.

Our night-check schedule was the same, day in and day out. We'd sleep all day and work hard all night to get the major maintenance done to prepare the aircraft for the next day's flights. One day before my incident, the ship was completing its final general-quarters (GQ) evaluation for TSTA. Since our berthing was near a damage-control station, GQ meant all of the airwing night shift participated from 1200 to 1900—right in the middle of our normal sleep period. Night shift worked from 1800 to 0730, so everyone had received only about four to five total hours of unbroken sleep in a 36-hour period. We certainly were tired and maintenance control

was aware of the situation. They had advised the supervisors to keep a careful watch on the crews and to work safely that night.

As the night-check supervisor of the avionics shop, I was the person who had to watch and make sure everyone was working safely, yet still try to finish our workload for the evening. Early in the morning, towards the end of the shift, the final task was to replace a trailing wire antenna (TWA). To complete it, we had to remove the cover that holds a spool of antenna wire, and swap out the five-pound drogue that attaches to the end of the wire. After the assembly was replaced, I sent the two PO3's working with me to eat. Upon their return I was going to show them how to properly install the drogue.

When they returned from chow, a PO2 joined them who also never had performed this task before. We grabbed our tools and headed to the flight deck. Unfor-

Navy photo by MC3 Ron Reeves



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Unfortunately, we forgot to grab the pub. On the way to the flight deck, one tech told me he had done the job before but had had trouble with some of the steps. I knew extra time would be required for OJT.

I started the job as I had many times before: The wire was pulled through the end of the aircraft, and I inspected the end of the wire that was sticking out. The wire had a kink and a spot where it looked worn. When a wire is damaged, all that has to be done is reel out more wire and cut off the damaged section. While the inexperienced techs were watching, I told one of the PO3s to turn on the HF1 TWA set inside the aircraft.

What we had forgotten in our tired state was to adhere to a bold warning in the procedure that requires the hydraulic-isolation valve circuit breaker to be pulled. I had done this procedure many times and thought I had set myself up for success.

The circuit breaker needs to be pulled in order for the aircraft to think it is airborne. The trailing-wire

antenna works normally, only if the aircraft is weight-off-wheels. If the circuit breaker is not pulled, the normal operation of the TWA is to immediately reel in because the aircraft is not airborne.

As soon as the system was turned on it worked as advertised. The aircraft sensed the landing gear was down in preparation for landing, and the antenna began to reel in. Unfortunately, it did so, with my hand inside the coil of wire. As the wire pulled in, the coil wrapped more tightly around my hand, pulling the wire and my hand into the end of the drogue receptacle. My hand firmly was stuck inside the coil as the wire continued tightening. I was stuck and couldn't do anything.

A quick-thinking PO2 decided to take action. He grabbed the dykes out of the tool pouch and cut the wire wrapped around my hand. As he cut the wire, we could see blood running out of my hand. Another tech called away a medical emergency. The tech who had turned the system on came out to see what had caused all the commotion. I told him to run back into the plane and immediately shut off the system.

With the wire retracted and power shut off, little slack existed inside the spool that could be pulled out. The techs struggled a little more and finally were able to cut my hand free with the little slack available. They ran me down four decks to ship's medical, with a brief stop to grab a cloth to control the bleeding.

Once at medical, the staff asked me if I was the medical emergency that was called on the flight deck! The ship's corpsman went to work inspecting the wound only to verify I had separated the tendon and nerves in my right pinky finger. The severity of my wound and the separated tendon was beyond the ship's capability. I needed to be flown to Balboa Naval Hospital for surgery. Within an hour of the incident, I was San Diego-bound.

At Balboa, the resulting surgery to fix my finger and reattach the tendons and nerves took seven hours. That step was the easy part. The consequences of my accident were two weeks convalescent leave and up to three months of physical therapy. Thanks to my peers and the medical staff, I have almost regained complete use of my hand.

The lesson learned is to slow down and use the pubs. Even when the task has been done many times before, time still should be taken to read the pubs slowly, so no step gets missed. I learned the real meaning that day about "written in blood."

Extra time also should be taken when fatigue is a factor, because even the most routine task is far more dangerous when your head is not in the game. 🙏🙏🙏

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