

Driving Mr. Buddha

Moving an aircraft around a flight line can be a hazardous job, but doing it at night and in close quarters is even more dangerous. Our line shack was tasked to move a P-3 from the wash rack to the flight line, and I was the driver of the Buddha that memorable night.

After a thorough pre-brief that included our standard ORM checklist for an aircraft move, 11 people walked out to the wash rack to begin the move. Five of those Sailors were blueshirts in training, and I was one of them. A yellowshirt was going to sit in the Buddha next to me, teaching the procedures for this move and watching my actions. The wash rack was located next to a neighboring squadron's hangar. It was a moonless night and very dark, with only one set of lights looking down on the area.

When we arrived, I noticed the tow bar was hooked to the back of the Buddha, which would require me to look over my shoulder while pushing the plane away from the wash rack. Being a new driver of this big beast, I requested to turn the Buddha around, so I could push out the plane while facing forward. My yellowshirt instructor agreed. We then disconnected the tow bar and drove the Buddha over a curb and onto the grass to turn around. This area had limited maneuvering room, so we drove the Buddha between a telephone pole and

the other squadron's hangar. The next thing I knew, one of the wing-walkers was yelling at me to stop.

After stopping, my instructor and I noticed a large wire lying on the windshield of the Buddha. Without thinking, he removed the wire, throwing it to the ground. We then got out of the Buddha, discussed the situation, and decided that I should sit in the passenger side for the rest of the move.

It is said that one link can break the safety chain, but we had five distinct factors that allowed this incident to occur. A lack of lights in the wash-rack area made it difficult for anyone to see the telephone line hanging down. The number of trainees on this job meant the qualified maintainers were too busy to notice the low wire. The limited space around the wash rack was unlike our training area in Jacksonville, Fla., where we had ample room to move vehicles and aircraft. I was new at moving aircraft and did not want to do that job while looking over my shoulder, but had I backed the aircraft, this incident would not have occurred. Our squadron had been on deployment for a full month and things had started to become routine. Lax attitudes might have been a contributing factor.

If we completed an ORM review more specific to that night move, we might have found all the associated hazards that were present, and a simple walk through of the Buddha's proposed path certainly would have identified the wire.

The last and most disturbing event in this move was the experienced yellowshirt had not thought about the consequences of grabbing a loose wire that could have been live. It wasn't hot, but a live wire could have killed him. 

The author wishes to remain anonymous. The story was submitted by VP-45's safety department.

