

Blown Away by

A key job among the flight-deck personnel belongs to the brave Sailor who hooks the load to the helicopter.

Navy photo by PH3 Fred R. Bollinger



the Effectiveness of PPE

By Lt. C. Pearson

We all have heard it a million times. “Wear your PPE; it will save your life.” We hear it so much that we tune it out.

In general, flight-deck PPE consists of an appropriate cranial impact helmet, steel-toed flight-deck safety boots, sound suppressors, safety goggles, long-sleeve jerseys/shirts, and a saltwater-activated float coat. Dragging PPE out onto the flight line, or donning a tight, hot cranial may seem like a waste of time to some, but it isn’t. Just ask our hook-up man.

It all started on a fine Navy day when our MH-60S Knight Hawk was performing a run-of-the-mill vertical-replenishment mission to a carrier. The aircraft were settled into their standard coordinated dance of one aircraft picking up a load, while the second aircraft delivered one. With our replenishment ship and the carrier steaming side-by-side, this pattern meant less than 30 seconds between picks. Proper coordination throughout this evolution is pivotal in keeping an efficient flow of goods from the supply ship to the customer.

One of the main factors in this helicopter orchestra is the smooth movement of all the flight-deck personnel. A key job among the flight-deck personnel belongs to the brave Sailor who hooks the load to the helicopter. This Sailor is called the “hook-up man.”

His fast-moving, dangerous duty requires him to move to the load; grab the pendant with its 6-foot, plastic, reach tube; and hold the pole steady while the helicopter flies the hook to the eyelet at its end. He’s looking up at an approximately 20,000-pound helicopter that is creating 70-plus knots of downdraft right in his face. This downdraft easily can blow a Sailor off his feet. Clearly, this environment is one in which flight-deck protection is required.

This evolution was going as well as any other. Routine can breed complacency, even in the high-tempo and hazardous job of vertical replenishment. This time, one of the two helicopters was sliding in to pick up a non-standard load. It was relatively light by aircraft standards; however, at 500-pounds, it was

heavy by human standards. This load was an awkwardly crated FA-18 Hornet flap. The crate measured about 12 to 14 feet long, stood 7 to 8 feet high, and was about 4 feet wide. These dimensions created a lot of sail area that, as we found, caused a tipping hazard when hit by the downdraft of the helicopter.

To make a long story short, when the helo came in for the pick, the load instantly tipped over on top of the hook-up man. When the pilot saw what had happened, he waved off and asked where the hook-up man had gone. The response from the aircrewman was, “Sir, he is under the load!” The entire crew of the helicopter thought they had caused a fatality on the flight deck.

The flight-deck crew quickly removed the load from the pinned Sailor, and he limped away. The hook-up man was bruised and had a few pulled muscles, but he returned to work the next day with the standard Navy prescription: “Take it easy for a couple days; here’s some Motrin....”

It turns out that the only thing that saved his legs was the steel toes of his flight-deck boots which created a fulcrum on which the crate rotated, thereby preventing it from flattening our 125-pound airman’s legs, pelvis and chest. You should be, as we are, convinced that his correctly worn PPE saved him from serious, permanent injury.

We understand some gear can be uncomfortable to wear. We know people modify it to provide a better fit, but these actions degrade the intended degree of protection. When this incident happened, we were operating in the Pacific at the equator, where PPE sometimes is uncomfortable anyway. In the hook-up man’s mind, though, the few hours of mild discomfort was nothing, compared to the possibility of having an injury that could last a lifetime. PPE works! 

Lt. C. Pearson wrote this article while deployed with HC-5 Det 4 aboard the USNS *Niagara Falls* (T-AFS-3).

You never know when PPE will save your life. Remember, if you are not wearing steel-toed boots—you should not be working on the flight deck!—Ed.