



Watch Out for

Falling

Helo Blades *in the* Hangar Bay

By AOC D. W. Nesmith,
USS *Iwo Jima* (LHD 7)

Author's note: The following event is true, although names were changed to protect the innocent or guilty, whichever they may be.

We received a high-priority technical directive that had hit the streets and was one of the has-to-be-done-immediately variety. You know: like the one you got last month that you'll complete next week if you have the time. Well, that wasn't going to happen here.

This directive applied to our Marine Corps AH-1W Cobra helicopter blades, including those stowed in overhead racks. The directive said we were to take down from their stowage racks all specified containers (with blades sleeping safely inside), then inspect interior contents for specific

part numbers and rework information.

The day we decided to undertake this tasking began as do most days at sea. Reveille came at 0600, and, shortly after breakfast secured at 0730, we initiated the directive's requirements.

Our crew consisted of a senior chief petty officer and five petty officers: two petty officers first class and three petty officers second class. Our equipment was checked and put into position, and we got ready to take down the blades from their hangar-bay stowage racks and check them in a roped-off area.

Then we seemingly were invaded by a moving sea of green—the 1,600 embarked Marines. Thankfully, Marines follow orders and are guided easily; otherwise, we might have had a few more “grease

spots” on the hangar-bay deck. The roped-off area didn’t keep quite everyone away, so we posted guards at key points to stop traffic and to avoid casualties.

We thought we had all “safeties” in place: Hard hats, cranials, and safety harnesses were strapped on, and *[[forklift]]* licenses were in our pockets, as always. We stood poised to lower the blades from their hangar-bay-bulkhead racks to the deck. We established clear and continuous communications between our man-lift operators and safety observers.

It was time to lower the first blade from its high perch. As the second container’s sling tension was taken up, connections were checked for security and even displacement. All was good, and it was thumbs-up from all around as the second canister safely made it to the deck. The final canister then slowly was lifted off the rack—one inch, six inches. A pause followed when the cables got a final check—as the evolution approached its conclusion.

Everyone intently watched what we all thought would be the uneventful end to this evolution. Our thoughts were turning to getting a cold drink (nonalcoholic, of course, since we were underway), taking a smoke break, or just having a cup of java.

Suddenly, we all heard a “POP!” and time froze.

The fellow in the man-lift basket later said, “It was like I could see what was happening and hear everything but couldn’t move to do anything.”

The safety observer said afterward, “All I could remember thinking was, ‘Man, I hope no one steps out that door right now!’” No one moved as the container instantly dropped to the deck and landed with a crash!

Then, gravity—which, for a split second, seemingly had immobilized all of us—freed us, and we all again were able to move and speak.

We first made sure everyone was OK. We then stepped back and assessed our situation. We had a shipping container housing a Cobra helo blade on the deck. The container’s lid was a little twisted but still held its now non-RFI *[ready-for-issue]* contents.

We had to determine why the sling had failed. When we inspected it, the sling was intact. It actually was the container’s lifting rings that had failed. These rings were of a U-bolt design that should have had a washer and nut underneath the container rim. Closer inspection revealed the two nuts had ripped through the holes in which they previously had been installed because required washers were missing. All four lifting U-bolts had missing washers or anchor plates, which we reported through an HMR (hazardous material report).

We learned to always inspect material and have the necessary in-house checks and balances in place. Thoroughly inspect the entire components of the job at hand, and never assume the “last guy” completed and correctly documented all necessary material inspections. When it comes to hoisting heavy aircraft assets, mishap consequences usually are grave and often fatal. **S**

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