

Balancing Act



By AE1 Joe Cox,
VAQ-139

After eight and a half months at sea, we were headed home. Our speed was 25 to 30 knots, which we had been maintaining for two weeks. We had gone through seven time changes—about one every other night.

I had felt a little irritated and tired the past few days. My only scheduled job this day was to replace a light bulb in the shop. Then, I would have nothing to do but enjoy the steel-beach picnic that was supposed to start about noon. “Wow! A break from work!” I thought. “Let’s get this job done quickly, so I can enjoy the sunny day on the flight deck.”

To do the job, I had to pull out a giant, heavy ladder. I had my choice of two in the shop, but one badly needed repairs. Both ladders were side-by-side in a locker. Unfortunately, the only thing on my sleepy mind when I went to get one was that steel-beach picnic. I opened the locker and grabbed

the first ladder I touched—as luck would have it, the broken one. I then grabbed a light bulb and my tools and headed up the ladder to get the job done.

I climbed to the top with my tools in one hand and the light bulb in a pocket, thinking, “Hey, I’m in a hurry, and I’m finally waking up.” At the top of the ladder, I still was holding my tools in one hand and the light cover in the other when the situation changed. Did I forget to mention that the Pacific Ocean isn’t always smooth? Even on an average day, swells will run 5 to 10 feet. How about the more than 200 electrical shocks reported each of the previous three fiscal years? Some of those victims also were in a hurry.

“I’m Superman,” I thought. “I’m wide awake now, and, besides, that picnic is this afternoon.” With that thought in mind, the ship rolled, and I lost my balance. It didn’t take me long to decide my chances of pulling off a balancing act might have been better if I had grabbed the sturdier ladder from the locker. Besides grabbing the wrong ladder, I had forgotten to ensure its safety pins were locked and the feet were resting properly on the deck.

For a moment, I swayed with the ladder, but, then, both smacked the deck. I avoided breaking my neck but scattered all my tools and broke the light cover, as well as the light bulb in my pocket. My only real injury was a bruised hip that mended a lot quicker than my ego.

I eventually made the picnic but didn’t enjoy it. I was too sore and embarrassed to sit with any of my friends. ■

The squadron safety officer, LCdr. Mark “Luke” Lucas, added this note to the author’s story:

“What can you learn from this experience? First, always prepare yourself with the right tools and PPE to do the job. Second, remain fully focused on the job at hand, and also be aware of your surroundings. Finally, never rush a job. When you sacrifice quality, you can end up injured or killed.”