



Editorial:

Expect the Unexpected



A greyhound drifted left and stopped in the port catwalk.

By Dan Steber

The aircraft dropped down to the engine.

That cliché, like another often overused but important one—“Keep your head on a swivel”—gained new meaning this week. I had the unfortunate duty to review photos from a mishap that happened almost two years ago. That incident involved an experienced chief who died when a turning rotor blade struck him. My task turned out to be one of the hardest jobs I ever have faced.



The flight-deck crew tied down the C-2 with as many chains as they could fit.

The photos that accompany this story are the only ones I can show because they are the least graphic. I debated using these shots at all, but the lessons found in the photos, from clichés, and from this incident are too important not to share. People often think our young Sailors—the carefree, fearless and sometimes careless ones—are the only people who need our attention. This mishap showed danger and death have no regard for age, rank or rate, or experience.



They removed the passengers and brought out “Tilley.”

The aircraft maintenance and material division at the Naval Safety Center has a road show known as a maintenance-malpractice presentation. The chiefs and senior chiefs who do this brief (I’m an alumni) use photos that show a survivor from a propeller incident. That blueshirt was lucky; a prop hit him but was



The aircraft was lifted out of the catwalk and secured.



Props, rotor blades, engine intakes, and exhaust can kill.



spinning at less than 20-percent rpm. His cranial shattered, causing a nasty set of cuts, but the youngster survived. The chief wasn't so lucky; he was decapitated and died. As a senior guy, he had considerable experience, but that level of proficiency didn't keep him out of harm's way.

I use the word "luck" often in this story for a reason. People throw around that word as if it were a merit badge, a sign of survival, or a mark of success. "I got away with that one," becomes a notch in a career, rather than serving as a warning. I believe a better approach is found in the modified adage, "I'd rather be good than lucky." That blueshirt didn't expect a prop to hit him that day, and he probably would say his action was stupid, rather than lucky. The chief didn't get a chance to say anything. If you depend on luck and not on skill, savvy or reason, based on an understanding of risk management, you, too, might make a fatal mistake.

Being prepared for any event and maintaining situational awareness is critical, and the crew on USS *Nimitz* used those skills to turn a harrowing experience into a positive one. After a C-2 drifted into the port catwalk, the flight-deck team had to respond. They secured the aircraft, removed the passengers, and got the aircraft back on deck, minimizing further damage. No one on deck that day expected to face such an unnerving challenge, but they responded.

Did we get lucky? Yes, to some degree. The aircraft didn't go into the drink or catch fire, but the flight-deck team's response was skillful and efficient. That group, like most other carrier crews, had practiced crash and fire drills. The team made sure lift points were greased, often used "Tilley" to simulate or to lift aircraft, and

was ready when needed. They maintained situational awareness and reacted with quick, cold precision.

The Greyhound's passengers mostly were VIPs from another country—what an introduction to carrier aviation. The mishap was bad but could have been worse. These visitors were grateful for a team that faced the unexpected with skill, rather than luck.

These stories are a simple reminder that our business is risky, but we can manage that risk and can avoid errors when we respond with well-honed skill.

I didn't know the chief killed by that rotor blade, the men assigned to that squadron and ship, or the officers who live with that awful memory. I can hope only that other Sailors will read this story, will see these photos, and will not make mistakes that lead to injury or death.

Dan Steber is the editor of *Mech*.



This blueshirt's head looks bad, but he survived because of his cranial.

His cranial was shattered; his head was scarred; but he is alive.



The tattered remains of a cranial show the damage caused by a rotor blade.



A shipmate's death is horrible, but we must learn from it.