

Aircraft Tow Crunch

By VMAT 203 Corrosion Control



It was just another day for the Marines in corrosion control. Night-crew workers routinely assemble in the shop, and, on this day, all seven of us were present. The motivation was running high because this night was our last before the weekend began.

The shop NCOIC returned from the evening maintenance meeting and tasked us with moving a jet to the wash rack. All six tow-crew members required to move a Harrier were inside the shop and ready to go. We all grabbed our cranials and headed out toward the flight line. Everybody walked right past the whistles on their way out the hatch. This was mistake No. 1.

The flight line was wet because of the heavy rain that day, and Mother Nature kept pouring it on. Nevertheless, we ran out to the jet, pumped up the brake pressure, and took our positions to tow the jet. I was the starboard-side wing-walker. As the jet approached the taxiway, the other wing-walkers did an about face and began to walk back toward the hangar. It doesn't take an entire crew to tow an aircraft on the taxiway, but everyone is required to back the jet into its spot once it reaches the wash rack. This was mistake No. 2.

I ran up to the tug and got inside the cabin. Once we reached the wash rack, the tug driver began to back up the aircraft. At this point, there were no wing-walkers! This was the third and final mistake. I remained in the cabin of the tug to avoid the weather. The imaginary drill instructor I call "Sgt. ORM," who sits on my shoulder shouting orders to my conscience, was tied up and gagged. My poor judgment was the culprit. These mistakes were prerequisites to what unfolded next.

I heard a loud crunch, which prompted the driver to stop and try to pull the aircraft forward. When he did that, I jumped out of the cab and chocked the jet. The driver and I then surveyed the damage.

An I-beam supporting a shed near the wash rack had torn through the airframe on the starboard wing tip. The driver and I disconnected the towbar,

and he made his way back to the squadron. Maintenance control and quality assurance were not too happy with what they saw.

This particular mission was doomed from the moment the tow crew stepped out of the shop. Six Marines walked out to the jet without conducting a pre-move safety brief. No one recognized we didn't have the proper gear. Once everyone but the driver and I abandoned the jet, no one had the fortitude to halt the operation. Even when the job was in its final stages, the mishap still could have been prevented, but I decided the procedures in place did not apply to us. I put too much confidence in the driver and didn't even get out of the tug.

As a result, the entire squadron has lost confidence in our shop. Too many mistakes were made for an entire crew to ignore. A tow crew is responsible for the safety of one another, as well as the safety of the aircraft. When you skip command procedures or rush an operation, the consequences far exceed any possible benefits.

Laziness, complacency, and lack of judgment are things that happen to the best of us. However, we, as aircraft maintainers, must have the sense to know that those lapses in ORM are more hazardous than any intake or prop. There were signs that procedures were being skipped before this incident, but, in this case, it took a mishap for ORM to really hit home. The incident could have been worse had a Marine been between that I-beam and the jet. Nobody would've seen or heard anything because there was an incomplete crew and improper gear. That realization should make every Marine and Sailor think twice before skipping procedures. 🍀