

Wing-Tip Crunch Teaches Communication Lesson



Navy photo by MC3 Ron Reeves

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It was just another hot September day in the Northern Arabian Sea. The sun was rising around 0330 and setting at 1530. We were five months into a seven-month deployment. Two squadrons were deployed ashore, so the USS *Enterprise* (CVN-65) flight deck was unusually spacious. To our chagrin, it wasn't big enough.

We manned up the E-2C Hawkeye, call sign Screwtop 601, for the last day launch as the ship steamed into the setting sun. We had engines on line, were ready to taxi, and had time to spare for the scheduled launch. As 601 taxied to cat No. 1, I noticed a P-25 firefighting vehicle was parked inside the foul line on the port side of our catapult. This position wouldn't be a problem if the bird ready to launch was a Hornet or other small aircraft. I ran up to the driver of the P-25 to let him know they needed to move because our E-2C wings didn't have enough room to spread with the fire truck parked there.

We already had learned this lesson the hard way earlier in the cruise; however, parking on the port side of the catapult inside the foul line was a common practice. When we crunched a wing against the P-25 earlier on cruise, the handler directed the drivers to park outboard of the foul line on the starboard side. On this day, the P-25 driver didn't heed the handler's instruction.

After explaining to the driver that we needed more room for our wingspread, he started to move. Simultaneously, the yellowshirt directing our aircraft gave the signal to the pilot to spread the wings. As the wings were moving, I noticed that the driver of the P-25 had moved the fire truck just a few feet. Seeing this problem, I ran to the driver and told him he needed to move or the wing would hit the truck. He moved again but slowly because the jet blast deflector operators were in his way. I immediately gave the stop signal to the yellow shirt. As I did so, the flight-deck coordinator and QAR



noticed the same problem, and they also signaled the aircraft director to stop.

This is where our communication failed. After seeing my signal, the yellowshirt relayed the same signal to the pilots in 601. The pilots saw that signal and, unaware that there was a dangerous situation developing near their left wing, they thought the signal was intended to stop the aircraft, instead of the wing-spread. The pilots continued to hold the brakes, but they did not reverse the wings.

Unbeknownst to the pilots, the port wing clipped the P-25 and lifted the fire truck off the deck a few inches, destroying the outer wingtip. Needless to say, this problem downed the aircraft resulting in a failed launch.

A process that had been carried out multiple times, day and night, for the past five months, went totally wrong. It should have been easier, because the deck was less crowded, and we were in no rush. There were several hazards we faced that day, and if we had eliminated any one of them we could have prevented this crunch. The P-25 should not have been parked inside the foul line against the handler's direction. The driver should have moved immediately when the problem was pointed out to him, and the other flight-deck personnel exacerbated the problem by standing in the path of the emergency vehicle. I should have given the wing-fold signal instead of the stop signal to remove any ambiguity. I should have given the appropriate signal the instant I realized that there might be a problem.

Complacency, error in executing proper flight-deck procedures, and a break down in communication resulted in the damage of an aircraft. Fortunately no one was hurt, but simple communication between airwing personnel and carrier flight-deck personnel could have prevented this crunch from ever happening. 🌸

Petty Officers Alvarez and Carter are assigned to the Screwtops of VAW-123.