

Why I Blew It

By Lt. Adrian Dawson

I was doing an interior aircraft cleaning of one of our squadron birds along with the rest of my crew. It was only the second time I ever had done it, and the job was simple. You wipe down certain areas, vacuum and mop the floors, and then call it a day. But, like everything else in the Navy, we have a checklist for this menial task. Had I used it, that simple document would have prevented my unfortunate incident.

Like any desert, the conditions are notoriously dusty at our forward-deployed location. So as a pilot, I started my portion of the aircraft cleaning in the place I feel most at home: the flight station. I started with the horizontal surfaces that had collected dust. And there was a lot of it. As my flight engineer was walking out to the aircraft with the checklist in his hand, I began to clean around the emergency-shutdown handles.

On P-3 aircraft, protected behind the e-handles, are the fire bottle (HRD: high-rate discharge) buttons, which release an extinguishing agent into the engine nacelles in the event of a fire. You probably can see where this is going.

I successfully cleaned around the No.s 4, 3 and 2 e-handles without any problems. However, while cleaning around the No. 1 handle, I heard the distinct click every upgrading pilot can recognize. It happened when my index finger hit something, which turned out to be the HRD button. With a sick feeling in my stomach, I looked to the right, so I could scan the forward load center, which contains various circuit-breaker panels.

Confirming what I already suspected, I saw that the circuit breakers for normal fire extinguishing were set. Holding on to a sliver of hope, I put on my hearing pro-

tection and walked outside to check the HRD pressure gauge for the No. 1 engine.

Seeing that the needle was pegged at 0, I knew the final nail was in my coffin. I slowly dragged myself back onto the aircraft and into the flight station, only to see my flight engineer dutifully running the aircraft-clean checklist. By the way, step 1, sub-step h, is “Pull primary HRD C/B’s.” RTFC! Which in this case stands for “Run The Freaking Checklist.”

In aviation, we use terms like situational awareness, which essentially means how close your perception of what’s going on mirrors reality. It is a term that should not be reserved for missions or flights. Where was my SA as I was cleaning around those e-handles? Did I know whether the breakers were in or out? Unfortunately, not until it was too late.

The worst part is that I’m a former ground-safety officer for our squadron. No one is more aware than I am about “mid-deployment complacency”, “focusing on the task at hand”, “everyone is a safety officer”, and “procedures are there for a reason.” My job was to organize safety stand-downs, make sure people know their safety chain of command, and even write articles for the monthly safety newsletter.

I think the takeaway here is to approach every event with the same intensity and attention to detail. Treat a simple aircraft cleaning as if it were an overland combat mission to support ground troops. Treat that ready preflight as if it were a search-and-rescue mission for a downed comrade. Bottom line: No one is immune to complacency or procedures, not even a qualified aircraft commander and former GSO. ✈

Lt. Dawson is a pilot at VP-47.



Navy photo by PH2 Jennifer Bailey