

Stick With the Basics



By CWO2 Corey Chisholm

It was only two months into our scheduled eight-month deployment. We were in theater and on board an LHA, doing routine NVG flight operations. My crash-and-salvage team was working like a well-oiled machine. Yet, at the close of flight ops, simply parking a P-25 mobile firefighting vehicle (MFFV) in its designated slot on the flight deck would become a problem.

Just months before deployment, my crash team went to NAS Pensacola for the Aircraft-Firefighting, Shipboard Team-Trainer course. This annual class teaches advanced step-by-step firefighting and rescue procedures. My team had the second highest score ever for amphibious-class ships. Following this specialty training, the ship completed ESGEX, COMPTUEX, JTFEX, and numerous other unit-level-training operations off the coast of San Diego. At the conclusion of our IDTC, we had conducted more than 6,000 safe launches and recoveries and had responded to 23 in-flight emergencies.

On station in the North Arabian Gulf, my crash-and-salvage crews vigilantly stood their watches. I remember talking with my chief—and thinking out loud—about how the division’s Sailors had become a top-notch, varsity organization. However, somewhere along the way, the team lost sight of the basics. Perhaps, I should have stressed the importance of remaining focused during routine operations more frequently. After more than 20 days of continuous flight operations, we experienced our first incident of the deployment.

Mishap-Reduction Opportunity

Aviation-Related Self-Propelled Equipment or Vehicle Mishaps
1 January 1995 to 6 July 2004

We had 49 Class A through C mishaps of this type (excluding aircraft “crunches”) during this period. Total cost was: 2 deaths, 4 injuries (1 major, 1 minor, and 2 first aid), and \$3,414,078 in damage. Causes were familiar: fatigue, loss of SA, lack of training, didn’t follow procedures, and other human-error issues. We can and must do better.

Here is an excerpt from a firsthand account that one of my Sailors gave for a post-incident safety report: “It was at the end of flight quarters. I was standing the last watch as the junior person on the P-25, and we were getting ready to secure the truck. My job was to get off the vehicle and to serve as a safety while the driver backed the unit. As the driver was beginning to back up, I jumped off the unit before it came to a complete stop. This caused my right boot to become wedged in the tire well. I tried to pull away, but it was too late. The front right wheel of the P-25 rolled over the toe of my right boot.”

The most disturbing part of this report was the first sentence. Until that point, everything had worked smoothly. But, at the end of a long day, these two hard-charging Sailors were at the end of their shift and temporarily lost focus. Standing watch on the P-25 demands a Sailor be alert and prepared to respond to any emergency on the flight deck at a moment’s notice. It is a monotonous job at times; yet, it is intense during an actual flight-deck emergency.

I am used to giving a mid-cruise speech to my guys about the danger of letting down their guard, which seems to happen all too often when tasked with repetitive jobs. That’s when a lax attitude and inattention to details begin to set in and can become dangerous. Unfortunately, it often takes an accident to remind us of the perils of working on the flight deck and to keep our heads on a swivel. We were a bit lucky on this one, but we learned that the basic procedures work best.

 CWO2 Corey Chisholm wrote this story while assigned as the Air Bos’n onboard the USS *Peleliu* (LHA-5).