

Stickball Is Played Best in



Who would think a simple pin could cause such a big problem with a hinge and door assembly?

Lt. Brian Wetzell, USCG

A three-man crew was at the tail end of a two-hour, local-training flight, and their HH-65 helicopter was being vectored for a full-stop approach at home field. The approach pattern just had brought them overhead a local shopping mall when the copilot, in the left seat, heard a distinct whistling sound. He could not identify the source but soon would know.

The copilot had been hearing the sound intermittently throughout the flight, but it had been for only a few seconds at a time, and never loud enough for the other crew members to hear. This time was different. As the crew began to discuss the possible source, the sound changed pitch and got even louder. Convinced the noise was coming from his door, the copilot placed his left hand against it to check for vibrations. As soon as his hand touched it, the top of the door fell away from the aircraft and caught the slipstream. The door's bottom hinge held fast, keeping the door from departing the aircraft altogether. The copilot quickly grabbed the door handle and pulled the door back

into its frame. The crew immediately turned for home and made an uneventful landing. The aircraft escaped further damage, and some unwitting shoppers were spared a very dangerous surprise.

During a post-flight inspection, the maintenance department discovered an interesting chain of events that led to this close call. The first link fell into place the night before, while the aircraft was parked outside the hangar on the wash rack. Having finished their major work for the evening, the maintenance crew decided to play an unscheduled, late-night game of stick ball. The field was the area around the wash rack. During a particularly dramatic at-bat, a broomstick somehow found its way out of the batter's hands, traveled at high speed across the wash rack, and embedded itself in the chin bubble of the helicopter.

Understandably upset, the crew immediately got to work replacing the chin bubble. In accordance with standard practice, the crew removed the copilot's door for better access to the chin bubble and proceeded to complete the fix. They reinstalled the door and returned the aircraft to service.

The next link fell into place during documentation. Normally, a door removal and reinstallation would be documented in the aircraft maintenance log. In their

in the Street



haste, the crew inadvertently overlooked the entry. This step was critical because it usually triggers QA to inspect the door before the aircraft is released for flight. Of course, that entry never took place. Had it been done, though, they would have found that the doorframe's emergency-jettison pin had not been threaded through the door's top hinge bolt. Without that pin, the top hinge of the door was in a jettison profile before it left the ground.

In this particular case, the perceived pressure on the crew to "make it right" as quickly as possible may have been quite significant. However, it does not differ dramatically from the significant pressure applied every day to meet operational commitments. Regardless of its source, the constant worry to complete maintenance must be managed effectively to safeguard procedures and to ensure attention to detail.

With regards to late-night athletics, this crew's activities certainly were good-natured and were designed to be innocent. They, however, did result in unnecessary damage to an aircraft, and perpetuated a mishap chain that could have had more serious consequences.

Lt. Wetzell flies with the Coast Guard in Savannah, Ga.

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