

# Unpinned Seat Could Be an Unplanned Ride

By AD1(AW) Derek Holbrook

An EA-6B recovered on board an aircraft carrier from the last event of the day. As the plane captain and a troubleshooter start pinning the ejection seats, the ground maintenance crew begins daily and turnaround inspections. The PC pins the pilot and ECMO 1 seats, assuming the troubleshooter has pinned the other two. That assume game always leads to problems.

We were just two weeks into cruise and complacency already was becoming a factor. The troubleshooter pinned the ECMO 2 seat in the aft cockpit and then helped the PC pin the ECMO 1 seat. The ECMO 3 seat in the aft cockpit went unpinned.

A second troubleshooter climbed up the Prowler, jumped in the forward cockpit, recording the LOX load.

As luck would have it, he noticed a reset knob missing from the eight-day clock. The shop notified maintenance control, and several technicians joined the FOD search.

A short time later, the yellow shirt notified the PCs that the aircraft had to be moved. With the FOD search in full swing, no room existed in the forward cockpit, so the PC waited for the move in the ECMO 3 seat. The two troubleshooters resumed their daily inspection on all four seats—with the PC still sitting in the unpinned seat. With the FOD gripe, the troubleshooters focused on boxes and kick panels, so they missed the PC sitting in an unpinned seat.

The flight deck cancelled the aircraft move, and we suspended the FOD search for shift change. The

Navy photo by PH3 Mark Rebilas

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crew secured the aircraft, everyone left, and the troubleshooters went to maintenance control to sign the daily/turnaround cards.

One of the first steps of the daily and turnaround inspection is to make sure the seats are pinned and other ground locks are installed. The team just shortcut maintenance procedures without even realizing it.

After the night-check maintenance meeting, two more technicians opened the canopies, reached over the unpinned ECMO 3 seat, and pinned the aft canopy. The FOD search resumed. During that time, other maintenance personnel reapplied power, jumped in the ECMO 2 seat—right next to the unpinned ECMO 3 seat—did system checks, removed a box, disconnected power, and finally left.

The FOD search in the front cockpit concluded, with negative results. After everyone left, a PO3 entered the front cockpit. This brings the total to eight maintainers who had climbed past, reached over, sat next too, sat in, or did a daily on the unpinned seat.

As a night-shift QAR, I arrived on the scene for the FOD search. The PO3 still was in the pilot seat. He got out, and I got in from the starboard side, looking at the aft clock on the way up to get an idea of the small knob that couldn't be found. I spent approximately 30 minutes in the forward cockpit, searching for the FOD with a flashlight and an inspection mirror.

I wanted to take a closer look at the most aft bulkhead from the rear cockpit, so I leaned into the back cockpit, over the unpinned seat, and looked as far forward with my flashlight as I could reach. During the inspection of the aft cockpit, I noticed a strangely familiar hole in the crotch of the ECMO 3 seat. It looks like the hole for a lower ejection-handle pin. I quickly glanced up and confirmed my worst fear, "The seat is unpinned!"

Not being qualified to pin the seat, I climbed down the boarding ladder, grabbed one of the integrity watches, and posted him at the boarding ladder, with instructions not to let anyone on the aircraft.

I summoned the AME QAR to see this huge mistake on the part of many maintainers, including me.

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An armed seat is like a rocket ready to go off.

I went back to the aircraft and waited until a plane captain pinned the seat.

Everyone reported to maintenance control, where the maintenance chief and AME QAR did verbal, tag-team counseling on the obvious safety violation that had occurred. They went over every point from the PC responsible for pinning the seat to the troubleshooters who performed the daily inspection while the PC sat in the unpinned seat. They also discussed the fact the troubleshooters had signed off the daily and turnaround cards, saying the seat was pinned. We all got an earful for not following written egress procedures before entering the cockpit.

What a wake-up call! How could so many maintainers have been focused on something so small, yet overlook a "loaded gun" pointing right at us? This story could have ended badly, but the good news is no one got hurt, and the aircraft was not damaged. For me, this experience truly was eye opening. 🍀

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