

THE FLYING

By AD2(AW) Nicholas Onofrio

On the afternoon shift, Christmas Eve 2003, I was assigned to troubleshoot a P-3C Orion that just had returned from a flight with a discrepancy of the engine-driven compressor (EDC) on the No. 2 engine. I determined that a sheared shaft was the culprit.

As the shift supervisor/collateral-duty inspector, I assigned two technicians to fix the shaft. I inventoried the toolbox for my crew and logged it out in the tool log in accordance with the NAMP, then sent the technicians to work. I checked on them periodically during the afternoon, but, by 1600, the job still was not completed. All I could think about was “secure time.” I really wanted to go home to my family and enjoy the holiday weekend.

I approached my maintenance chief and proposed that a worker and I would come in early the following Monday morning to complete the job. Monday also was the day I would be checking out on pre-deployment leave. I couldn’t wait for Monday! The maintenance chief reluctantly agreed with my request since the aircraft was not scheduled to fly until early Monday afternoon.

At 0600 Monday morning, my technician continued where he left off

the previous Thursday. I inventoried the toolbox and logged it out in the tool log as before. Together, we went to the aircraft, and I inventoried the box one more time before starting the task. My technician finished the maintenance, and I inspected his work. Satisfied with the results, I then re-inventoried and locked the toolbox.

Returning to the shop with leave on my mind, I made a regrettable decision: I did not sign in my toolbox, and I kept the key in my pocket. I figured no one else would need the toolbox, and I could use it on another task.

The aircraft we had repaired required an engine ground turn, and it was decided that the scheduled flight crew would perform the operational check before takeoff (which we sometimes are authorized to do when the command is at 50/50 holiday manning). The aircraft was turned, and the maintenance was signed off. The P-3 then was released as safe-for-flight.

A few hours later, I had to do a maintenance task on a different aircraft. I still had the toolbox key in my pocket, and no one else had used it. I decided to take the same toolbox out with me to perform the maintenance, but I did not complete the tool inventory or



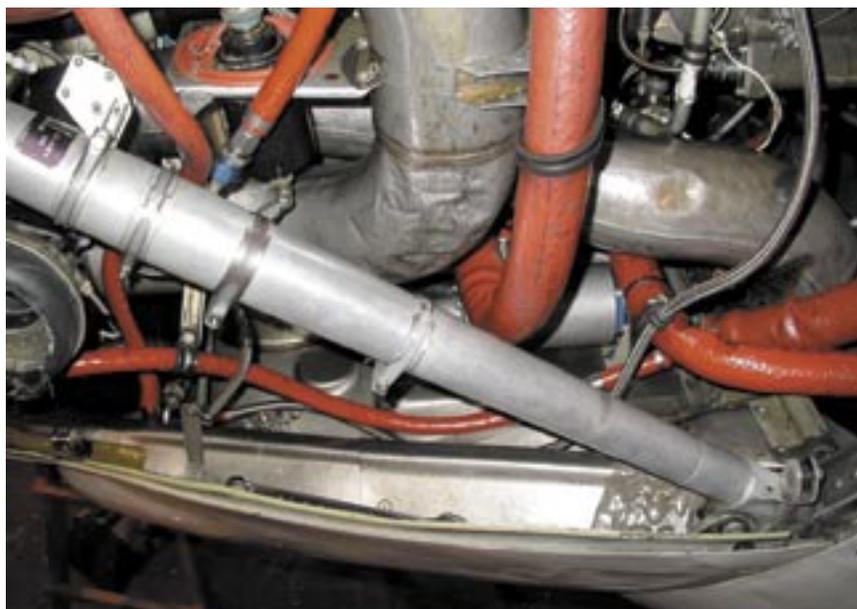
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annotate the tools log. After all, the key had been in my pocket, and I knew no one else had used the toolbox.

Upon completing my assigned task, I inventoried the toolbox and noticed a wrench missing. Oh the butterflies... I immediately knew where it was, and my heart sank. The wrench still was lying in the belly pan of the aircraft that had been released earlier.

I ran to maintenance control to inform them of the situation. The aircraft was recalled from its mission, and, upon landing, a member of QA and I recovered the wrench from the No. 2 engine. The wrench was right where I had left it. Operating an aircraft with this tool in the engine could have caused loss of life or aircraft, effectively snapping our squadron's unparalleled Class-A mishap-free flight-hour record.

The bottom line is, I was complacent—nearly negligent. The situation would not have arisen if I had followed proper tool-control procedures. All maintenance-department personnel can learn from my experience and mistakes. To ensure my “head was in



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the game,” my qualification was suspended for two months, and I was tasked to conduct a GMT tool-control lecture. This lesson won't soon be forgotten.

Tool control is serious business and should not be taken lightly. No matter what your experience level or qualifications, failure to abide by the published procedures significantly raises the level of risk and can have disastrous results. There were many rules in place that I elected not to follow. My command and that aircrew were lucky to get away unscathed. 

AD2(AW) Nicholas Onofrio was assigned to VP-26 at the time of this incident.

Following all the rules may seem time consuming for routine tasks, but all the work entailed in dealing with the results of a preventable mishap is truly a waste of time and resources! Fortunately, this individual displayed courage by quickly reporting his mistake, which helped to reduce the risk to the flight crew. A valuable lesson was learned in this incident without having to pay a high price. —Ed.

