Another Typical Day... Working 100 Feet in the Air

By Naval Surface Warfare Center,
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Training new personnel is one of those things in life that provides great personal satisfaction. Being able to take something you were taught and then pass that knowledge on to another person can give a feeling of accomplishment. That's what happened last year for Stevan Lopez III of the sensor network engineering branch in the air dominance department at Naval Surface Warfare Center, Port Hueneme Division (NSWC PHD).

The Port Hueneme Division provides in-service engineering and logistics support for combat systems installed on naval surface ships. This mission requires members of the command to travel to ships and perform maintenance, install new equipment, or upgrade existing equipment.

In May 2005, Lopez, a senior installation engineer with 11 years' experience at the command, was at Naval Station Norfolk with fellow command member Andy Malec, also an engineer. Their task was to perform an engineering-change installation on the cooperative-engagement-capability (CEC) equipment on board USS *Wasp* (LHD-1). Malec was relatively new to Port Hueneme, with just over two years' experience, and this field assignment was one of his first jobs working aboard ships.

The engineering-change installation required working aloft on the mast of *Wasp*—at the O-10 level, about 100 feet above the main deck. All the proper safety procedures were followed. A working-aloft chit was processed, the required equipment was tagged out, and the necessary words were passed over the ship's announcing system. A ship's-force escort led the installation team, and a safety observer took his post on deck to observe the workers.

Because Malec was new to working aloft, the veteran Lopez explained the purposes of the safety harness and lines and showed him how to wear the gear—just as other command members had trained

Andy Malec (left) and Stevan Lopez III wore the safety harnesses shown here during the engineering-change installation aboard USS *Wasp* (LHD-1).

Lopez when he was starting out. Here's the way Lopez described the events of that day in May:

"I took Andy up the mast of LHD-1 with me that day to do EC-USG2-038, along with Petty Officer Weber from the ship. We went up the last ladder (10 feet tall), facing the aft portion of the CEC CAAA (conical active aperture array) on about the O-10 level. Petty Officer Weber went up first and around the front, clockwise on the O-ring maintenance platform. I went up second and counterclockwise around the O-ring maintenance platform.

"To go counterclockwise, I had to cross over a 6-foot ladder leading to the tactical air navigation (TACAN) system. My two safety lines were attached to each side of the ladder. To cross over, I had to hold on to the TACAN ladder. The top two pins of this ladder were not secured in position, which allowed the ladder to separate and swing out from the platform, with me along for the ride.

"If not for my Ninja-like reflexes, I would have gone skydiving without a parachute. Fortunately, I noticed the SMQ-11 (shipboard receiving terminal antenna) below. It broke my fall but now bears the prints of a pair of Marine-size 8W combat boots.

"The funny thing about this bit of excitement in an otherwise typical day was that Andy subsequently tied himself off and held on white-knuckled every inch of the way afterward. Nice way to break in the new guy, huh?"

With the installation completed successfully and everyone safely back on deck, Lopez contacted NSWC PHD to tell his supervisor, Ken Harris, about the incident. Petty Officer Weber, meanwhile, notified his CPO and the CSOOW (combat systems officer of the watch) so repairs could be made to the unsecured ladder.

Harris recognized Lopez' dedication to safety. "Stevan followed all the safety requirements before and during the work and, even after the incident, still had the composure to accomplish the mission and then report the event back to the command."

Lopez credits his senior installation engineers and technicians with emphasizing the importance of having the proper safety equipment. It was because of this training that he was able to show Malec the value of having a safety harness without having to experience a fall.

"You hear a lot about safety requirements," said Malec, "but to see the benefits firsthand really drives the point home. I definitely learned to follow all the rules and to ensure other team members do, too. Hopefully, when I'm a team lead, I'll be able to reinforce the safety rules without another demonstration like Stevan gave me."

Commander, NSWC PHD, Capt. Steve Huber, recognized Lopez and Malec with a command coin, which he presented during an all-hands ceremony. "Safety is my No. 1 job," stated Huber, "and because you followed the rules, I'm recognizing you, instead of having to write a letter of condolence."