



Put a Band-Aid on It

I was underway on USS *George Washington* (CVN-73), somewhere in the Caribbean, bleeding out my side, and staining the dull green of my flight suit and safety gear a deep red.

By Lt. Kevin McElroy

The E-2C carries three NFOs in its combat-information center (CIC). We each have different preflight procedures, depending on which seat we are assigned. I was in the radar-operator seat, and my preflight duties were to make sure the radios and sensor-electronics boxes in the forward-equipment compartment (FEC) worked. Everything had checked good, but we still needed codes loaded for our secure radios and data link.

I took my seat and was running up the system while we waited for our aviation-electronics technician (AT) to finish loading the codes. The mission commander (MC) asked me to go forward to check on the AT's progress. I got up, shuffled forward through the tight passageway of the FEC, and asked the AT how he was doing.

"One box left, sir," he replied.

I headed back aft to my seat. Just before passing

through the door to the CIC, I felt my survival vest momentarily snag on something. Then I felt a hard object press into my side. I passed through the CIC door and sat down in my seat. The hard object pressing into my side was gone. I assumed it had to have been one of the metal fittings that hold my harness together. I reached under my survival vest and tried to find the suspect fitting—nothing was there. I felt no pain and figured the harness had shifted back into place on its own. I was ready to dismiss the whole thing and continue with my preflight. But, when I pulled my hand out from under my equipment, my hand emerged completely covered in blood. I usually don't bleed that much from the abdomen on preflight.

"I'm bleeding." I told the other two NFOs, as I looked at my hand.

The air-control officer (ACO) pulled out the first-aid kit and told me to "put a Band-Aid on it."



“No, I’m bleeding,” I said. This time, I held my blood-covered hand up in front of the MC.

“Get out! Go!” the MC commanded me. This order shook me out of the initial shock of what just had happened. We both got up and rushed out of the plane, past a very surprised AT.

On the flight deck, with the noise of aircraft engines all around, yelling “I’m bleeding,” will not make you understood through everyone’s double-hearing protection. Taking off your survival vest and pointing to the large maroon stain under your arm that is slowly growing downward more effectively will get the point across. The display of blood worked: The flight-deck chief spotted me and quickly got the attention of a medic. I was rushed into the medical station behind the island.

After the medical team had taken my vital signs, took an X-ray of the wounded area, and stitched me up, I was told my survival knife had deployed inside its pocket on my survival vest. It had cut through the vest, harness, flight suit, and my body, making a hole in my side about an inch long and an inch deep.

My squadron uses a Benchmade, 154-mm, drop-blade survival knife. It will not flip open unless the safety is off, and the switchblade button is pressed. It is designed to be operated entirely by one hand.

Why did my knife deploy unexpectedly? Was there a problem with the safety on my particular knife? Had my movements through the cramped FEC forced down the safety? Had a gremlin crawled into my vest in an attempt to murder me? The answer is impossible to know.

Impossible, because I had not adequately pre-flighted my gear. I checked my survival radio, and I

checked that my emergency oxygen bottle was full, but I did not check the pocket with the knife. I had checked it on previous flights but only to see that the knife and flare in that pocket were present. I never had checked the safety. To my memory, I only can recall taking the knife out of the pocket once to check its operation. Our parachute riggers are required to do gear inspections every 30 days, and they do check the safety on the survival knives. A week had passed since my gear’s last inspection.

I now realize it is not enough to check the presence of items in the survival vest. The proper operation of those items also must be preflighted. Do a thorough preflight, and you won’t find yourself thinking, “I don’t normally bleed this much from the abdomen on preflight.” 

Lt. McElroy flies with VAW-121.

Our first indication of this incident in the ready room was the IMC call, “Man down. Man down. Man down on the flight deck, battle-dressing station.” Soon the bitch box at the duty desk squawked, “Ready 7. Primary. That’s one of your air-crew.” My heart sank as I envisioned a hot-pump crew switch, propeller-arc incursion, or a broken ankle from falling off the aircraft. As I investigated further, it quickly became obvious what had happened. We isolated the gear for the flight surgeon to determine the source of puncture. Then we went to medical to provide good will to our ailing young Jedi. My take-away from this was verification of the “expect the unexpected” mantra. A well-trained, watchstanding team is critical to success when a mishap occurs, no matter how different it may be from the ones you practice and study.—LCdr. Paul Lanzilotta, safety officer, VAW-121.