

The Tool's in th

By LCdr. Todd Lewis

It was hurricane season again, and, sure enough, Mother Nature sent one our way. It must have been my lucky day, as I had the honor of “volunteering” to fly an SH-60B aircraft inland. The hurricane evacuation wasn’t to start until 1700.

I was told a tool was missing when I asked for the aircraft book. The maintainer knew the signed-out tool was used only on my aircraft. All the other aircraft already had been released for flight. I then went to the aircraft to help look for the missing speed wrench. Of course, it was nowhere to be found. The aircraft was quarantined, and the search continued.

Twenty minutes later, the maintainers finished looking for the tool. My copilot also went out to look. When everyone was satisfied the tool was not on the aircraft, the maintenance officer released the plane safe for flight. My copilot and I were comfortable with the situation.

As the sun set, the hotel rooms at our destination filled without us. Maintenance control waited for our “Let’s go” call, and I signed out the aircraft. I gathered the other crew members and briefed the flight. We were satisfied our thorough preflight inspection and the maintainer’s tool search were adequate. Convinced the tool wasn’t on our chariot, we started our uneventful flight inland.

After we landed, a crewman decided to take another look behind one of the avionics panels. None of us had looked there before because the maintainer only worked on the outside of the



Photo by Matthew J. Thomas

the Hurricane

aircraft with the tool. “No way is the tool inside a panel,” we thought.

By now, you probably have surmised what the crewman found. The entire crew stood there and let out a holy you-know-what when he showed us the missing speed wrench. We put it in a safe place and headed for the hotel.

That night, I reviewed the situation in my mind, deciding what I should have done differently. The obvious answer, in hindsight, is not to fly. The crew had self-perceived pressure to get the multi-million-dollar aircraft away from the approaching hurricane. However, I don’t think we let the pressure influence our decision; we were confident we did the right thing.

I realized, in the comfort of my hotel room, that my mistake wasn’t asking too few questions;

it was not asking the right question. Using my in-depth training in metaphysics, I should have noted the tool could be only in one place at a time. If it wasn’t in the toolbox, it had to be in the aircraft. In preparing for the flight, I proved where the tool was not. I should have focused on proving where the tool was.

The process of elimination is a fine method in some cases, but for tool control, that technique is inadequate. I’m not the only one to share the blame here, but the bottom line is, I signed for the aircraft and took it flying. The spot where the tool was posed little threat to flight safety, but counting on luck is not a smart way to run a tool-control program.

What about the hurricane? It didn’t come close to our base. Live and learn as I did. 🦅

LCdr. Lewis flies with HSL-42.

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