Photograph PH2 Christopher L. Jordan

Basket Case

By AD1(AW) Glenn Kildare

WestPac 03 was the maiden deployment of the FA-18F, my first Western Pacific cruise, and the initial voyage as the power-plants LPO. This combat deployment was an opportunity to showcase the Super Hornet, which is configured for myriad missions, including air-to-air refueling with an air-refueling store (ARS).

After five months of Operation Iraqi Freedom, our squadron was tasked for a recovery-tanker mission overhead USS *Nimitz* (CVN 68). The cyclic flight schedule was going as planned, when I received a phone call from a maintenance-control chief about an ARS problem on Fast Eagle 106. I went to maintenance. I first learned from the squadron duty officer that, despite multiple attempts and emergency procedures, the aircrew could not retract the hose and basket assembly. Feeling helpless, I waited for CAG and our skipper to decide whether to jettison the hose assembly.

They decided to cut the hose, and the ARS guillotine system worked as advertised. The hose cleanly separated from the ARS pod, dropped into the sea, and the aircraft recovered.

"World-class organizations do not tolerate preventable accidents." –Donald Rumsfeld, SecDef

Once 106 was on deck, we downloaded the ARS pod and began our investigation. After removing the pod's tail section, we noticed 8 feet of the hose was jammed and tangled around the drum, preventing the hose from streaming or retracting completely. We checked for correct synchronization of the drum-and-reel guide and found it was aligned correctly. We then found the hose guide would not move through its full path of travel. Upon closer inspection, we noticed a bolt and nut were installed incorrectly in the hose-guide track. The locknut was protruding along the track and prevented the full travel of the hose guide, causing the hose guide to shear and to jam the hose.

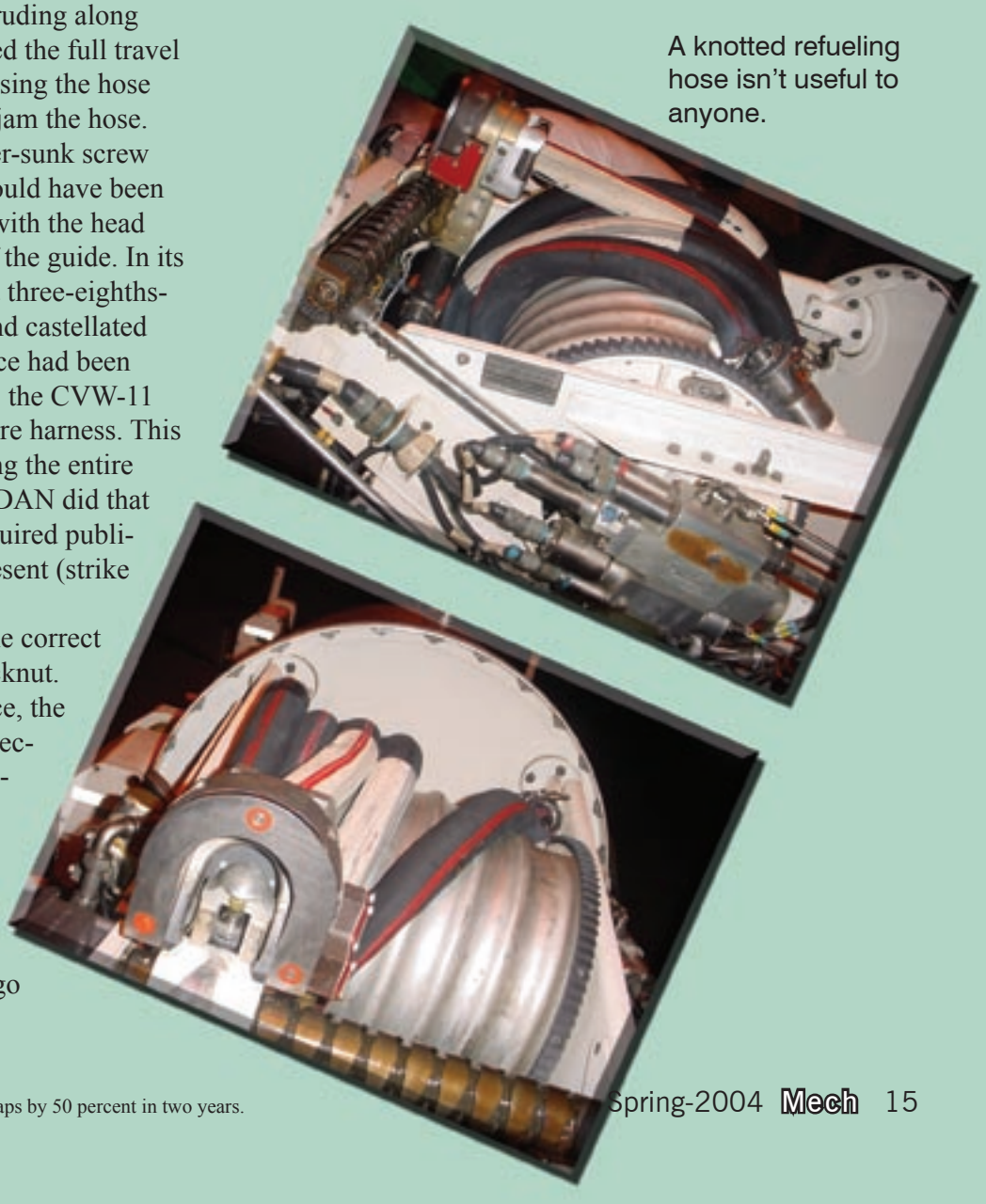
A flathead, counter-sunk screw with a locking nut should have been installed in the track with the head flush to the surface of the guide. In its place, however, was a three-eighths-inch, hex-head bolt and castellated nut. When maintenance had been done two days earlier, the CVW-11 ARS team had replaced the W-300 wire harness. This action required removing and replacing the entire hose-guide assembly and track. An ADAN did that job, but he did not have or use the required publication (strike one). A CDI was not present (strike two).

The publication clearly showed the correct type and position of the screw and locknut. Deciding it was not major maintenance, the ARS team incorrectly did a daily inspection, instead of the required full operational test on the pod (strike three). The daily deck required the hose to be extended only 6 feet and then retracted into the pod. After the rest of the checks were completed, the team concluded the pod was good to go and signed off the discrepancy.

The ARS team should have extended and retracted the hose assembly completely, which would have highlighted the bad maintenance. When the aircrew extended the hose on the first flight, the hose guide traveled along the guide until it hit the protruding nut and sheared the connection between the drum and guide—this function worked as designed. The hose eventually wrapped over itself and fouled the pod, causing the crew to jettison it.

Maintainers need to use the book and do a thorough CDI inspection. It is the only sure way to get the job done right the first time, and those steps will help make the 50-percent reduction goal a reality.

Petty Officer Kildare is the power-plants LPO at VFA-41.



A knotted refueling hose isn't useful to anyone.