The Rusty Pad Eye

By AT3 Travis Armstrong

I just had returned to Japan from a nice Christmas leave period in Breezy Point, Minn., and a visit with my parents. I still was getting re-acclimated with the Far-Eastern way of life, when I had an embarrassing run-in with lax behavior. My experience almost led to a serious mistake.

At the evening meeting, maintenance control went through the list of maintenance and re-spot requirements. My shop was tasked to move an EA-6B from the line to the hangar. This task was simple, but I made sure we had all the necessary items: tail- and wing-walkers with whistles, brake rider, and tractor driver.

Everything began smoothly. I signaled to remove four TD-1 tie-down chains, settled the brake rider into position, and began to direct the efforts of the crew and tractor driver. As soon as the aircraft moved forward, the nightmare started.

I noticed the aircraft lurch forward and shudder, and I heard the "ka-chink" of a chain as it dropped to the asphalt, which was followed by shouts from everyone. I suddenly realized what had happened.

The Prowler had a fifth tie-down chain installed—something I had not anticipated or looked for. The wing instruction states four chains are necessary to secure an aircraft for the night.

By the sheer luck of my Irish ancestry, the pad eye that held the fifth tie-down chain had snapped. A post-incident inspection found the pad eye had failed because of corrosion, but that fortunate occurrence didn't keep me out of hot water. It was a large blessing and prevented any damage to the main strut or to any related components.

All the elements of a catastrophe were present, but nothing bad had happened. I did learn a few lessons and have some recommendations for my line-division shipmates:

- When you return from leave, check every job twice. Even the simplest tasks can lead to disaster if your mind isn't in the game.
- When it's dark, use a flashlight. I didn't and missed the fifth chain.
- Do a pre-brief with your team, and go over a written or mental checklist.

I was hesitant to share my story, but, after a little coaxing from my chief, I understood it's necessary for everyone to learn from this incident. My shipmates tagged me with a new nickname: just call me "Pad Eye."

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