

All for a Football

By MM2 Pat Lumumba,
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The crew heard, “Man overboard! Man overboard!” The boatswain’s mate of the watch, however, never said a word about a drill. Thus marked a tragedy that occurred just 96 hours before an amphibious ship was to return to port from a successful seven-month deployment in the fight against terrorism around the world.

The young victim in this case, a PO3, perished while chasing a football on the flight deck. A shipmate had tossed the ball, and the PO3 felt obliged to catch it. Unfortunately, he hadn’t assessed the risk of being thrown off the flight deck as the ship took a sudden roll in heavy seas.

For just an instant, this “absolutely fine Sailor,” as his skipper described him, put aside the primary law of self-preservation and paid the ultimate

price. Would-be rescuers found the football, along with the float coat and smoke float shipmates had thrown him, but there was no sign of the missing PO3.

How did this tragedy happen? To start with, the victim had let himself be lured by the relaxed atmosphere that often evolves while a ship is headed home from a long deployment. He perhaps was focusing too much on the long-awaited family reunion and not enough on the fact he still was aboard a naval warship. A shipmate, friend, superior, or mentor should have reminded him how important situational awareness is to your safety in a ship’s extremely hazardous environment—whether in port or at sea. A naval ship is an industrial fortress, not a playground.

This tragedy never would have occurred if the victim just had applied the principles of operational risk management to what he was doing. Sailors need ORM engraved in their minds—along with the rules, procedures and lessons learned from continuous training—for their own protection, as well as the safety of all hands. Learn to make safety a first priority, not the last. ■

Navy photo by PHAN Carl E. Gibson



The victim in this story was playing with a football on the flight deck, just like these Sailors are doing.

A DOUBLE DOSE

By Ken Testorff,
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What’s worse than a Sailor falling overboard from the flight deck of an aircraft carrier? It’s two Sailors falling overboard—from the flight deck of the same aircraft carrier, just 16 days apart.

The first incident involved an E-5 who was tasked to work on an aircraft on the flight deck at night. The aircraft was spotted so that no part of it was over water. After the E-5 completed his task, he went below but, later that night, returned to the same aircraft. Unknown to him, though, shipmates

had respotted the aircraft so that its tail now was over water.

Thinking that the aircraft still was spotted completely on the flight deck, the E-5 moved toward the tail. Failing to see a tie-down chain, he tripped and fell over the coaming. He hit and grabbed onto the deck-edge safety net but lost his grip and fell into the water.

Two airmen nearby spotted a flashlight falling toward the water and reported man overboard. The victim heard the 5MC man-overboard announcement, assumed the HELP (heat-escape-lessening posture) position, and waited for rescue. A boat carrying a rescue swimmer was launched and rescued the E-5 20 minutes later without incident.

The victim was wearing a float coat and cranial when he went overboard but lost the cranial upon hitting the water. Neither he nor the rescue swimmer sustained any injuries.

The second incident involved an E-3 who was sitting on a chock, with his back against the lifeline on sponson No. 2, smoking a cigarette with a friend. The E-3 leaned backward—and just kept going. He had thought the lifeline would support him, but it didn't.

His friend immediately threw him a life ring and reported man overboard. Within 10 minutes, a SAR helo with a rescue swimmer on board had rescued the victim. Both he and the rescue swimmer escaped injury.

The mishap report for these two incidents listed the root cause as “human factor, unsafe act, error.”

In the first case, the E-5 lost situational awareness and failed to ensure the part of the aircraft he had to work on was spotted in a safe location. A mandatory two-man rule has been established to make sure no one works alone on the flight deck during darkness.

In the second case, the E-3 leaned against the lifeline with the mistaken belief it would support him and keep him from falling overboard. *[The applicable reference here is paragraph C0102x of the NavOSH Program Manual for Forces Afloat (OpNavInst 5100.19D, with change 1), which says, “Do not lean against lifelines. Never dismantle or remove any lifeline or hang or secure any weight*

Navy photo by PHAN Tina Lamb



A Navy rescue swimmer prepares to rescue a Sailor who fell overboard.

or line to any lifeline, except as authorized by the commanding officer. Use temporary lifelines when possible.”—Ed.] Subsequently, crewmen rigged standoff lines on smoking sponsons to prevent Sailors from standing near the edge.

A battle-group safety stand-down also was held on SITE-TV. This stand-down included a discussion about the seriousness of man-overboard situations, hazards they pose to the entire battle group, and the importance of honoring lifelines. Other topics that were discussed included complacency and water survival.

The stand-down concluded with the safety officer interviewing the victims, rescue swimmers, boat officer, and helo pilot. The interviews focused on how the mishaps occurred, the actions of all participants, and the potential hazards encountered by the boat and helo crews responding to a man in the water. The stand-down lasted about an hour and 15 minutes and was taped for replay on board the carrier. Copies also were distributed to all ships in company. ■

OF REALITY