



# A Close

By Lt. Chris Hayle

It was a very dark night at the end of our fifth month of cruise and our fourth continuous month in the Arabian Gulf. We were manning up for what would be the XO's final night event of the deployment (sorry, no commander's moon tonight). At this point in the cruise, the flight-deck crew was tired, as were the aircrew. We knew every man-up had the potential for a mishap. The squadron's safety department and everyone in the chain of command had briefed us on the potential for disaster.

We started up and had both engines online. As the copilot, I ran through the pre-taxi checks, and all we needed was a yellowshirt to direct us to the catapult. We were parked in the junkyard, aft of the island, facing the spaghetti of the arresting gear cables. Our taxi to the cat was delayed because the green-shirts were reattaching the arresting gear cross-deck-pendant to the 3-wire. They were also completing their checks by pulling the wire out and back with a tractor. As a result of the 3-wire's movement, our maintenance crew was placed in the awkward situation of having the safety chain guarding the propeller arcs compromised.

Photos by PH3 Danny Ewing and  
PH3 J. Scott Campbell  
Photo composite by Matthew J. Thomas

# Encounter of the Worst Kind

Our plane captain, his PC trainee, and the flight deck coordinator cleared the area in front of the aircraft. They were positioned to the port side of the nose at our ten o'clock, in order to remain clear of the 3-wire's bight on the retract. Our QA rep was positioned to the starboard side of the nose, and the AME positioned further to his right, about five feet away from the turning propeller. This left a gap in the safety chain directly in front of the Hawkeye's nose.

**It was a blueshirt who had run out of the landing area...She was running straight for the starboard prop!**

After the 3-wire had been pulled out three times, a yellowshirt approached the aircraft and gave the signal to break us down. We ran through the final items of the pre-taxi checks and waited for the chocks and tiedown chains to be removed.

I looked in the side-view mirror and checked the progress of the chains being removed from the starboard mainmount. I saw a quick movement beneath my window outside the aircraft. It was a blueshirt who had run out of the landing area and slipped through the gap in the safety chain in front of the nose. She was running straight for the starboard prop! The QA rep, who moved in to remove the starboard nose tiedown chain, spun around and tried to grab her, but she was moving too fast. I immediately started to reach up and pull the right emergency shutdown handle. Before I could pull the T-handle, a quick-thinking AME risked his own life and darted in towards the propeller to intercept her. He grabbed the blueshirt, pulling her away from certain death. She was no more than two or three feet from the

spinning prop when he reached her. She was moved away from the aircraft and sent below deck, still not realizing how close she had come to a gruesome death.

In the E-2 community, all maintenance crews and aircrew have propeller-arc safety drilled into them. We never violate a prop arc unless preflighting the aircraft or performing maintenance on the prop. In the CV environment, young Sailors attached to

ship's company and jet squadrons are not accustomed to prop arcs.

During a dark night on the flight deck, it's just about impossible to see a turning prop. With the jet noise on the flight deck, hearing the Hum-

mer's distinctive drone from our T56 turboprops isn't easy. This incident illustrates the critical importance of the E-2C prop safety chain. Even if I had pulled the T-handle and shut down the engine as soon as I saw the blueshirt, the prop would have still been spinning fast enough to kill her.

The blueshirt was just trying to get the aircraft broken down expeditiously, but she almost paid for her lack of situational awareness with her life. Not long ago one of our sister squadrons had a similar prop arc mishap where a blueshirt was killed. Everyone on the flight deck needs to be fully aware of what is happening around him or her. If you see people waving blue wands near the nose of a Hawkeye or Greyhound at night, give that area a wide berth. And the next time you're on the flight deck or the hangar bay and you see someone walking through a prop arc (or a helo tail-rotor arc) during FOD walkdown, give them a friendly reminder. 🇺🇸

Lt. Hayle flies with VAW-126.