

# Hey, Doc, Know a Good Plastic Surgeon?

By AO1(AW) Patrick Maxie

It was Saturday morning at Patuxent River, Md., and the first half of the holiday-leave cycle had begun. Navy and contract test requirements were scaled back, and the flight schedule was limited, so we focused on scheduled maintenance. The squadron did have one great deal: a submarine all to itself for six hours. Everyone wanted to go, including our chief test pilot. The crews were excited, and my load team and I picked up that energy. We knew timing was critical, and everyone got into the flow. Too bad, for me, things didn't stay that way.

My duty section arrived at 0700. We all were in a good mood and were well rested. Our assignment was a routine ASW test flight for a P-3C Orion, but we all knew the importance of this flight. We did our pre-load briefing, checked out our gear, and went to work. As routine as the load may have seemed, I could tell my team felt the urgency of this flight. The schedule faced one delay after another, and we knew the aircrew had a limited range time to rendezvous with the submarine.

The aircraft was due at the combat aircraft loading area any minute for a load of 20 explosive SSQ-110A buoys, and I still was finishing the continuity checks on 40 external buoys. One chute checked bad, and I set all the switches to off (safe), opened the door for the sonobuoy safety switch, and began to reseal the problem buoy in the chute. Out the corner of my eye, I noticed the plane captain already had pulled chocks. Anticipating the launch, he was preparing for the aircrew to start the engines and to taxi out when I was done.



I just needed to complete the load like I had done a million times before. I loaded the buoy, closed the sonobuoy safety door, and turned to go into the aircraft to complete the continuity check. My safety observer was standing behind me, trying to help, or at least, be available if I needed help. I was so focused on my task;

I quickly dodged around him. In my haste, I had avoided running over the safety observer but didn't miss the lower edge of the aircraft's port flap.

Blood suddenly was everywhere, and I felt incredible pain from my left nostril. I never had felt such intense pain. My nose almost was ripped from my face, and the doctors at the emergency room said I was lucky I hadn't lost an eye.

I had been doing by-the-book maintenance and believed I was doing everything right. I had a checklist, safety observer, cranial, and goggles. I was caught up in the perceived urgency of the mission and had lost awareness of my surroundings. By the end of the day, I had 20 stitches, starting at the bottom of my nose and extending up to my eyelid. My mother would have found it difficult to love that face. I was fortunate a trained professional patched up my injury, leaving me with few scars.

I learned that no matter how urgent the mission or how routine the task, you have to remain aware of your surroundings, and you need to take time to do the job right. I found out that you don't have to be doing something dangerous to be in a dangerous situation.

Petty Officer Maxie is an ordnanceman at the Naval Force Aircraft Test Squadron, Patuxent River, Md.