



*By AO3 Mercedes Sheehan*

**T**he flight deck of an aircraft carrier is a place that always has intimidated me. My constant level of awareness reminds me to take extreme caution around aircraft and always to wear the proper safety equipment in this hazardous environment. After a rare and unexpected incident on deck, I now have firsthand knowledge of the importance of my cranial and flight-deck attire. In fact, that gear saved my life.

This incident occurred on Sept. 11, 2003, while I was on board USS *George Washington* (CVN 73) for a short boat deployment with VFA-106. I was standing near the island, watching our aircraft launch and land on the flight deck, and waiting for any arm or dearm duties. I wasn't alone—many other people stood near the hummers and helos. At about 1530 that afternoon, one of our aircraft approached the ship and landed. I watched it touchdown on the deck and catch an arresting-gear wire. I turned away and did not see the wire snap, but I was able to catch a glimpse as it soared into the air and headed in my direction.

The wire struck me on the head and on my right leg. The entire right side of my body was numb after I was thrown onto the deck. I was in shock and then found myself sitting on the flight deck with many other injured people. A fellow ordnanceman picked me up and carried me to docs, who were arriving on scene. I also recall someone taking off my cranial because the wire had forced it partly off of my head. I then was placed on a stretcher and rushed to medical.

My experience at medical was unpleasant because I started to feel more pain as I became more coherent.

A helicopter took me and others to a larger hospital for additional care after I was splinted, wrapped, and prepared for the flight. After being fully examined, I was told that I luckily had only a few serious abrasions and contusions but no broken bones. I had to have a contusion on my head stapled and was told to rest.

That evening and the following morning, many people from VFA-106 visited me and were relieved to see I already was on the road to recovery. I spent three days in the hospital and was not able to work for two weeks.

This accident has been an awakening experience for me and for everyone at my command. My cranial is what saved me from more serious injury or death. The rest of my flight-deck attire prevented more serious injuries to my body. Whether it is on the flight deck of an aircraft carrier or the flight line ashore, the protective equipment that we wear everyday is the most valuable item that we have out there. This incident is a perfect example of why we should use it correctly. 

Petty Officer Sheehan works in the ordnance shop at VFA-106.

*I had the opportunity to talk with Petty Officer Sheehan. I wanted to ask a few questions not covered in her story and to check on her recovery. This Sailor from San Diego, Calif., knows how closely she and her shipmates came to death. She was on the deck near the island with AO3 Adrian Conwell. Although she caught only a glance of the snapped wire slicing toward her, Petty Officer Conwell saw it clearly and pushed her away. She didn't have time for a prayer or even a thought; the wire hit hard and fast. Lying on the deck, she recalls the moans, groans and tears of injured shipmates. The mass-casualty call was missing "This is a drill. This is a drill," and she was confused. AO3*