



by Lt. Andy Collier

During my first at-sea period (a good-deal, 56-day, WestPac “deployment”), I took turns standing duty as the air-wing safety officer. This watch rotates among the squadron safety officers; I had it every eighth day. Every time it was my turn, there were no flight ops, because we were either in port, or it was a rare no-fly day.

The next time it was my turn, I got up and donned a flight-deck jersey instead of my flight suit. I headed to the ready room to get a cup of coffee and peruse the message board while the first briefs of the day were going on. I also glanced at the air plan to note the timing of the FOD walkdowns. I saw that flight ops were scheduled to continue until long past midnight. I noted with satisfaction that my squadron was also FOD-god for the day, which meant we were in charge of organizing the FOD walkdowns for the air wing. That meant there would be lots of familiar faces at the walkdowns.

Crews walked for the first event. I grabbed my float coat and cranial and headed up on the roof to begin my day as safety observer. I wondered whether I was going to contribute to safety or just be one more person in the way on the deck. After all, most of these folks were up on deck long before my first brief and were still there long after I finished mid-rats, day in and day out, in all kinds of weather. What could I possibly tell them?

I started by checking in with the handler and flight-deck control. The handler briefly described the day’s operations and emphasized the importance of keeping unnecessary people off the deck. He must have been reading my mind. Next, I did the J.O. workout and climbed all those ladders up to the 09 level to drop in on the air boss in pri-fly to see if he had any passdown or words of wisdom for me. The boss reminded me to keep my eyes open and my head on a swivel.

So out I went into that most dangerous and unnatural environment: the flight deck during

cyclic ops. In a float-coat and cranial. No helmet, SV-2 and nav bag. No strapping in. Just me with a big deer-in-the-headlights look, playing on the freeway during rush hour—and rush hour happened here every 1+15.

It was a long, rainy day. We were in the Gulf of Thailand on a joint exercise, so it would have been hot, even without all the jet engines turning. When it wasn't raining, the humidity was worse than the hottest summer day in Pensacola. By the time the last fixed-wing recovery was complete at 0130, I'd been pounding the steel since 0900, and my feet hurt worse than I thought possible.

I'd learned a few things, so I sat in my stateroom late at night to record them.

First, empty your pockets. Of everything, not just the obvious spare change and keys, every time you go up on the deck. Leave it in your stateroom, your mailbox, your ready room chair, the SDO desk, anywhere but on the flight deck. Things fall out of pockets, always have and always will.

Next, always, always keep your head on a swivel. Make sure the maintainers and shooters on the deck do the same thing. After being on the deck during one or two fly days, it becomes too easy to get used to the tempo and relax. Those guys in float coats up there every day get tired and distracted, too.

Always take the route to the jet that minimizes the amount of flight deck you have to cross. And if you ever get to be air-wing safety duty officer, make sure you use a cranial with a head set and a mouse from either ship's safety or UHF repair. Having a mouse on the flight deck is like turning on the lights in a dark room. The added situational awareness helped me be part of the safety solution, rather than one more clueless observer getting in the way and being part of the problem.

FOD walkdowns are extremely important. Not only do you prevent losing engines and get a breath of fresh air and some sunshine, you can let the maintainers in your squadron see you up there. You can inspire them by showing them you care about the airplanes and FOD. They notice if you are there. And they notice if you aren't there. It may not seem like much to you, but they notice.

Always wear your personal protective equipment. Always wear double hearing protection. Always make sure that your harness is zipped and cinched, your SV-2 is zipped and attached, and that you wear your visor down (preferably the sun visor

during the day and the clear visor at night, not the other way around). Notice if your plane captain, troubleshooters and maintainers are wearing their PPE correctly.

During the rain, the line guys had their rain gear on. I noticed one PC who appeared to be wearing his float coat under his rain coat. That didn't seem to be the optimal way to wear a float coat, and I pointed that out to the young PC. When I grabbed his shoulder to get his attention over the noise of the turning jet, I could tell that he had forgotten his float coat entirely. Looking embarrassed, he scrambled below to find it.

Never think, "They can't possibly be that dumb" when watching an unsafe situation develop. Jump in and stop it when you see the links of the chain building. I watched a Hawkeye taxiing off elevator 4 and forward over the arresting wire on its way to cat 3. The nose-wheel straddled the No. 3 arresting wire and went out of detent. As the Hawkeye added power to get over the wire, the nosewheel ended up just sliding down the wire. So the yellowshirt called a couple of blueshirts to put a tow bar on the nosewheel and use it as a lever to rotate it back into the nosewheel steering detent. So what did the blueshirts do? They attached the towbar to the aft part of the nosewheel, requiring them to lever the tow bar toward the prop arc to get the nosewheel back into detent. When I saw the squadron flight-deck chief holding onto the float coats of the blueshirts to keep them from getting sucked into the prop arc, I couldn't stand it anymore and intervened. They were just too close to slicing and dicing a couple of blueshirts. I don't want to call anyone "dumb," but after 10 or 12 hours on deck in the blistering heat with the air boss, the bosun and the chief yelling at you, anyone can do things that seem stupid. The blueshirts reattached the tow bar to the forward part of the nose gear, wedged it back into detent, and the aircraft launched without further incident.

Mostly I tried to stay out of the way. It's a fast-paced world on the flight deck, one that we aviators aren't used to unless we are strapped in and taxiing toward the cat. Not getting used to it is good, because it keeps us from being too comfortable up there. 🦅

Lt. Collier flies with VAQ -136