



ORM Is a Safety Voice

Photograph by Matthew J. Thomas
Composite by John W. Williams

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By AO2 Christie Boyd

During an operational risk management (ORM) training session at my EA-6B squadron, shipmates recounted stories of mishaps in which they were involved. As it turned out, I won first prize for the most hair-raising encounter.

Fresh out of boot camp, my first tour of duty was with a different EA-6B squadron at NAS Whidbey Island, Wash. Like many other young airmen, I was assigned to the line to gain flight-line experience. This assignment was wonderful, but one incident made an indelible impression that has lasted for five years. In my case, I could have prevented an ambulance ride to the base hospital simply by speaking up.

On a frigid, rainy day in December, I was one of six line people tasked to wash an EA-6B for a 14-day inspection. Most of us were inexperienced. After two hours, we only were halfway done when a CDI checked the aircraft and said we hadn't cleaned all the grease points. By this time, I had begun to feel the first effects of frostbite. The temperature was dropping into the 20s, and the typical Whidbey Island rain was freezing. Even with protective equipment, I could not feel my hands or feet, and it was getting harder and harder to hold a brush in my hand. Soon, the fun really began.

The Prowler's wings were folded, but we needed them spread to clean the outer wings, flaps, slats and speed brakes. The PC called maintenance control for an engine turn, which is necessary to power the hydraulic motors. One of the maintenance chiefs decided to take a shortcut, and ORM was the first victim.

The jet was needed for a flight after the wash, and a successful engine turn would make the EA-6B ready for flight. Instead of doing the engine turn after the wash, maintenance control decided to keep the engines turning while we washed the jet. This would allow a simultaneous sign-off of the engine turn and plane

wash, but this decision posed a severe hazard for an inexperienced plane crew, which already was stretched to its physiological limits.

The plane captain assigned a specific task to each trainee to improve our efficiency; I was responsible for running the hose. At the four-hour mark, the mechs started the engines and extended the flaps, slats and speed brakes. We went straight to work.

I thought about how unsafe it was working so close to the tailpipe while the engine was turning, but I did not ask any questions. It seemed normal to the supervisor, and we all wanted to finish the job, to end our misery, and to return to our warm shop.

After finishing the starboard wing, I stood aft of the wing and adjacent to the starboard tailpipe exhaust. I looked to see if the port wing was ready for a rinse; the trainee on that side motioned for me to come over. With hose in hand, I ducked under the starboard tailpipe and stood up in front of the port tailpipe. Unfortunately, that engine was turning, and I gave the pavement an up-close-and-personal interview with my face.

I blacked out for few seconds, but, when I came to, I realized the exhaust was on my backside, my cranial was gone, my knees hurt, and my ears were ringing from the noise. The plane captain had little time to react because everything happened so quickly. Once I was free of the exhaust, someone grabbed and carried me a safe distance away. Moments later, I heard the engines winding down.

I escaped with some bruises and a minor concussion; however, it could have been much worse. I later learned my cranial was found 50 yards behind the aircraft.

I often have thought about this incident, and two lessons resonate in my mind. First, the dual plane-wash and engine-turn made bells and whistles go off in my head, but I didn't approach my supervisor on this issue. If I had expressed my doubts, it may have instigated the use of ORM. Second, the team was fatigued, but we didn't tell the supervisor. If we had asked, he would have made a crew change.

The message of my story is simple: You are never too junior to find your ORM voice. 

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