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That's what my wife jokingly used to ask me anytime I watched TV or listened to the stereo.

I'd reply, "No, I just like stuff louder."

The jokes about my minor physical disability stopped, though, when the flight surgeons readjusted my baseline for an annual hearing test. I had become good at the standard tricks for passing the test but realized the only person I was fooling was myself. Now I'm working hard to conserve the hearing I have left.

For 13 years, I've been a naval aviator aboard aircraft carriers where loud noise is a recognized occupational hazard. You can't tell I have a problem to look at me, but the junior officers and Sailors in my squadron know it when they talk to me, and my wife and kids know it when I watch a blaring TV. More importantly, I know it every year when I step into an audiology booth for my flight physical. My hearing is lousy, and it wasn't that way when I joined the Navy. The loss has been a slow, almost imperceptible process—one that didn't have to happen.

Since flight school, I have worn double-hearing protection in the cockpit—a combination of those little yellow foamies you wad up and stick in your ears and a flight helmet. Aboard an aircraft carrier, though, it's not enough just to wear hearing protection while flying airplanes off the flight deck. Any cruise veteran will tell you how painfully deafening it is to be caught unaware on the 03 level under the arresting gear while an aircraft lands or under a catapult when an aircraft goes to full power. The ship abounds with incessant and traumatic assaults on your ears, and it's not only during flight operations.

I'm convinced the noise level from daily maintenance in some areas of the ship is harmful. Here is my common-sense approach: If it hurts your ears, it's too loud. There also are lots of background noises. Even the ship's ventilation system produces an annoying hum. You get so used to these noises, though, that you stop hearing them.

I'll never forget returning home from my first cruise and finding my boom-box as I unpacked. I

plugged it in and cranked the volume to my standard “cruise” setting, which turned out to be earsplitting. At that point, I realized how loud life is aboard ship.

My ears still hurt when I’m on the flight deck with my hearing protection on, and a Tomcat goes into after-burner on the catapult. That’s a good thing, though; it means I still can hear. I wear earplugs when I hit the rack at night and flight ops are going on. I sleep directly below a catapult, and I know if the noise is painful when I’m awake, it’s damaging my ears when I’m asleep. I also no longer wait to climb into the cockpit to put on double-hearing protection. Now it’s on before I ever step onto the flight deck and walk to my aircraft.

When I’m on the flight deck for FOD walkdowns, a jog, or just to check on the maintenance when flight ops are secured, I bring a pair of foamies with me. There are a thousand ear-piercing noisemakers on the flight deck and all over the ship just waiting to get you when you’re least prepared. You never can tell when a helicopter is going to arrive on the roof or a huffer is going to turn in the hangar bay. As an extra precaution, I even take a pair of foamies to the gym because it’s right below the 1-wire.

I take precautions when I’m home, too. I’m perhaps the biggest nerd in my neighborhood. If I mow the lawn, I wear hearing protection. If I use a power tool, like a drill, I wear hearing and eye protection. I take no chances and operate in a max-conserve mode. When I’m around my kids, I turn down the stereo because I don’t want to pass on my problem to the next generation. None of these things will help me regain any of my hearing loss, but they will help me hold on to what I’ve got left.

It’s really too bad you can’t take a picture of hearing loss. There are some real eye-grabbing photos for people who smoke, chew tobacco, or don’t wear eye protection. Nearly everyone

in the fleet has seen the poster of the poor fellow whose ring degloved his finger (*see copy on Naval Safety Center’s web site*). I removed my wedding band the very day I saw that gruesome image and haven’t worn it since. If there had been an eye-arresting Kodak moment to depict the misfortune of hearing loss, I perhaps would have been more cautious.

I miss hearing all the high notes of a violin concerto, and it annoys me that telephones don’t ring very loud any more. It’s also a nuisance to have to constantly lean forward and cup my ears during a normal conversation. Take heed young Sailors; become believers right now and leave the Navy with the same ears you entered it with. I wish I could. ☹

The author was assigned to VAW-117 when he wrote this article.

Protect your ears, or you may salute your hearing goodbye.



Navy photo by JO1 Marc Boyd