

HELP!

I'm stuck on the Wing

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Standing on the top of a ladder, not using spoiler locks, and performing a task alone that is usually performed by two, are obvious serious safety violations.

I did not use ORM ...

I was dispatched at mid-morning to troubleshoot a hydraulic leak on the left wing. Accompanying me were two traditional guardsmen. We quickly diagnosed the malfunction and determined that both inboard spoiler swivels required replacement. The swivels were of the old "bird cage" type and needed

to be replaced with the latest upgrade. The newer variety of swivel required the installation of a flairless hydraulic fitting and provided a good training opportunity for the weekenders.

After removing the hydraulic lines to the shop, I proceeded to instruct the young maintainers on the procedures for cutting off

the old fittings and installing the new flairless ones. Despite a warning to follow me step by step, one of the young airmen was a little rambunctious and proceeded at his own pace. With the sound of a crunch, one brand new flairless fitting was ruined. As any KC-135 hydraulic mechanic knows, this also renders

the hydraulic line too short for another attempt.

A search of the supply system revealed that a new line was available at a nearby active duty base. However, by now, the workday was nearly over, so we made arrangements for me to pickup a new line on my way home to be installed early the next morning.

When I arrived at the active base, my counterparts had called and left a message that all was well and that I was to report for work at the normal time because they had located a new line. So, I picked up the new part and headed for home.

That night, I did not have a restful sleep. Over and over

again I ran the same scenario through my mind. The two traditional guardsmen who were going to replace the line were not qualified to perform this task. To the best of my knowledge, the shop supervisor also had never performed the installation of a new swivel assembly. In fact, prior to being assigned as the



Help, I'm on the left wing of 276!

headlines, "Senator Dies In Guard Crash." Since I couldn't sleep, I decided to drive into work early and double-check the swivel installation. I had to

be raised. To raise the spoilers manually, it's necessary to depress the bypass valve on each of the two spoiler actuators while physically pushing the spoilers

left hand. There I am, at 5 a.m., in the dark, alone, and hanging from the left wing of a KC-135.

As I hung there, I calmly began to think of a way out. I knew

arrived seconds later. It was a man from the fuel shop who had just arrived for work. My voice must carry well, for the fuel barn was over 300 yards away.

affect subordinates. It is well understood that the best mechanic does not always make a good supervisor. However, a good supervisor must have the experi-



Photo by SSgt Cheresa D. Clark



Photo by TSgt Mike Buytas



Photo by SSgt Tony Tolley



Photo by A1C Stacia M. Willis

be covert because I didn't want any one to know that I doubted my supervisor's abilities. At about 5:00 a.m., I passed through the doors and headed for the flight line. Much to my surprise, someone called out my name. Our scheduler was also in early this day and saw me exit the building from his second floor window. After a short conversation, he understood exactly what I was doing and why.

It was common practice to find a ladder at the wing tip of the aircraft, as well as a fire bottle and some AGE equipment. The jet in question was prepared for flight, so its flaps were already in the down position. I retrieved the ladder and opened the cove lip doors to gain access to the spoiler swivels. In order to get a clear view of the swivels, the spoilers must

up. This is a procedure that is normally accomplished by two people. However, sometime earlier in my career, I had perfected a method of doing this by myself. I found that by depressing the bypass valve of both actuators, one with my left hand and one with my right hand, and with only a slight discomfort, I could push the spoilers up using my head. Not exactly a smart thing to do.

Now get a good picture of this. Both hands occupied, my head pushing up on the spoiler, and I'm standing on the top of a ladder. You guessed it, the ladder kicked out from under me. Rather than dropping to the ground, I frantically searched with my right hand for something to grab. Imagine my surprise when I felt the spoiler gently come to rest on top my left hand, which had grasped the flap track. Now it was impossible for me to let go with the spoiler resting on my

that the crew chief would arrive in about 30 minutes, so I kicked my feet up and over the flaps, I could sit on the flap and simply wait for help. Well, I just couldn't get my feet up and over that flap, so I continued to hang on.

My arms began to get tired after about 5 minutes. The spoiler resting on top of my left hand also became uncomfortable. I began to wonder how much it would hurt after another 15 or 20 minutes, or how much skin I would lose from the back of my hand if I were to yank it out. I decided to swallow my pride and call for help. I remembered the scheduler's window was open and reasoned that he might be able to hear me.

"Help, I'm on the left wing of 276! Help! Help!" I shouted for a good 2 or 3 minutes. Then I heard a voice call back, "Where are you? Keep yelling!" My hero

I can picture all of you aircraft mechanics rolling on the floor overcome with laughter. I can sense your thoughts, "This guy is a good candidate for the Darwin Awards." It's hard to believe that this is a true story. It is even harder to believe that I would be dumb enough to put it in writing. I'm sharing it because of the very deep lesson it carries. Standing on the top of a ladder, not using spoiler locks, and performing a task alone that is usually performed by two, are obvious serious safety violations. One might also even argue that my judgment was also impaired by a lack of sleep.

I am no longer a part of the unit concerned, so I can say this freely for the first time. The real lesson is contained within the old Airman Leadership Course 1, Volume 1, lesson 015. The lesson reveals that a supervisor's technical incompetence can negatively

ence, skills, and knowledge of the AFSC over which he is supervising. My concern about my supervisor did not justify my own stupidity. My own incompetence on that morning could have jeopardized the very flight I was trying to ensure was safe.

Yes, this story is true. I placed myself at risk in the name of safety without considering my own safety violations. Despite all the drama, everything went off smoothly that morning. The headlines in the evening paper could have been, "Sergeant Crushed by Wing," or "Senator Dies in Guard Crash." Thankfully, neither event happened nor was either story written. What will be your safety story? Be safe and remember that the end does not always justify the means, especially, if the means cut corners and put lives at stake. And lives are important, even if it's your own. ▶