

SOMETHING DOESN'T LOOK RIGHT

By TSgt Jesse R. Munday III, Eglin AFB, Fla.

It was day 2 of a 3-day Phase II exercise. The F-15Cs had come back from their sorties, and the aircraft commanders had relayed back to the production super what they had expended. The load crews were briefed on the simulated expenditures and waited for the aircraft to return to chocks for a quick replenishing load. After the half-up/half-down loads, the jets cranked back up and taxied out for launch. The first aircraft took off, and then the second, but something looked different. Something fell off the second jet as it gained altitude over the runway. It looked like a missile! How in the world can something like this happen?

This is how! A weapons load crew prepped the aircraft to replenish its simulated expenditures, which required the download and then upload of one Captive Air Training Missile (CATM-120). The crew unlocked the missile on the launcher and was told that the fuel truck was there and ready to gas up the jet. The crew had to leave the area until refueling was complete. All gassed up and ready to be loaded, the weapons expediter was notified to dispatch the load crew back to the jet to complete the job. A different load crew was sent to the jet. They prepped a different CATM-120 to be down/up loaded. After completing the load,

Photo by SrA D. Myles Cullen

a pilot was sent to inspect and accept the jet and launch on the next sortie.

Did everyone do their job as outlined in applicable technical data? The answer is a resounding, "No!" The sad truth about this mishap is there isn't one single link in the chain of events that caused the missile to freefall to the runway. Instead, several people failed to perform their duties according to technical orders. First, the initial load crew did not secure the CATM-120 to the launcher prior to

leaving the area for aircraft fueling. Since there was no requirement for the first crew to record the load in the forms until it was completed, communication between them, the expediter, and the second load crew was crucial. Unfortunately, the message about the unfinished load didn't make it to the second load crew. Secondly, the expediter did not send the original load crew back to complete the load but dispatched another crew without informing them of the unfinished load. In addition, the second load crew, now

working with a different missile, never inspected the aircraft's other weapons stations as required. Lastly, the pilot

were subject matter experts. They had performed the procedure so many times they thought they could do it from memory. And, they thought they had created workable shortcuts to complete the job faster. What they failed

to realize is that following technical data is their job and that it's there for exactly this reason: it ensures the job is completed in a safe manner, and most importantly, done right every time.

So, the missile fell off and slid down the runway. Fortunately, nobody

was hurt, but an "inert" missile was destroyed. If any one of the people mentioned above had completely followed their technical guidance, the missile would not have departed the jet uncommanded. Let's use this mishap as a tool to prevent something like this from ever happening again. Simply put, don't work from memory and don't take shortcuts. When you go out to do your job armed with your technical data, you may be the one who breaks the accident chain. ▶

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