FATAL mistakes

Test procedures ignored. Safety checks skipped. Warning bell broken. How complacency led to an amphib sailor’s death

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Not long after morning colors, Personnel Specialist 1st Class (SW/AW) Regan Young ventured onto the aft missile deck to make some phone calls before the amphibious assault ship Essex weighed anchor after a three-day port visit to Bali, Indonesia. The aft missile deck was a popular — but unauthorized — place to use cellphones. Young sat down beneath the missile launcher and placed a call.

It was a hectic morning Nov. 23 as the crew prepared for sea — and one division was way behind schedule. At 8 a.m. — only an hour before the ship set the sea and anchor detail — combat fire control division discovered that the pre-underway missile launcher test hadn’t been completed, an involved process that requires five personnel, including a safety observer, and an equipment tag-out to ensure the boxy, eight-cell launcher is operational.

The work center supervisor, a fire controlman who was likely a petty officer, dispatched three PCs to hurriedly complete the check. One of them entered the aft launcher room around 8:15 a.m. Thinking he knew the steps by heart, he didn’t bother to break out the procedures, per the regulations. He didn’t establish communications with the other stations, didn’t follow the start-up steps, didn’t post a safety observer — and didn’t check that the aft missile deck was clear. And before he switched the NATO Sea Sparrow launcher to remote control, he didn’t sound the alarm: The bell had been broken for nearly a year.

At the turn of the switch, the launcher’s stow locks disengaged and its servo motors energized. And then, unexpectedly, the massive launcher moved. It spun clockwise nearly a full turn as its cells rose skyward, a dynamic and random motion that can be triggered when the system is improperly initialized.

It struck Young, a 37-year-old father of two who was three weeks from transferring, its lower edge pinning him down as it dragged him across the nonskid deck. Alarmed to hear the mount spin, the fire controlman rushed topside. He saw Young stagger into the ship, blood running down his face. Young collapsed. At 8:22 a.m., a medical emergency was called away. One of the missile cell covers had shattered and Young’s cellphone, multitool, watch and sunglasses were strewn inside the red painted circle around the launcher, which warned in white block letters: “DANGER AREA.”

Young was pronounced dead at