

When It Rains, I



By Lt. Jason Douthit

Shortly before my arrival at NAS Key West for shore duty as a station SAR pilot, I was told that the powers that be were sending me to school to become the base aviation-safety officer. “Cool,” I thought, “a month-long vacation in Monterey. What a good deal.”

I soon found myself in one of the most beautiful parts of the country, taking a very interesting course of instruction with a wonderful group of peers. I did well at the school, and before I knew it, I was driving cross-country to Key West with my diploma in hand and a whole lot of ideas in my head.

During the drive, I kept thinking back to one of the comments made by the CO of the school at graduation. He remarked that being an ASO was a lot like being in combat, minus the getting-shot-at part. He said, “It is long periods of utter boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror.” I was a little puzzled by his statement.

How bad could it possibly get? After having the job for a year and a half, the CO’s comment was lost in the back of my mind. Things were going well. Aside from the routine duties like safety standdowns and human-factors boards, very little had occurred. I only had to break out the 3750 once for an endorsement of a ground mishap that occurred with one of the dets. My replacement was in the pipeline with orders on the board, and in five or six months I’d be on to a new chapter in my career. This is when things changed for the worse.

It’s no secret the Florida Keys are perilously exposed to hurricanes. The entire island chain sits a few feet above sea level and is surrounded by water. Since arriving for duty, I had seen six storms come close enough to Key West to make people sweat. We even evacuated for a couple of them, but in the end, the damage was superficial and things quickly returned to normal.

It Pours



Then hurricane Wilma formed in the Gulf of Mexico. Many of the sailors stationed at NAS Key West lost everything and returned to a life much different than it had been a few days earlier. The holidays were right around the corner, and the first holes in the infamous Swiss cheese model fell into line. Major, unforeseen stress had a foothold, and safety margins began to suffer. Families were uprooted and placed in tiny, cramped temporary quarters. Insurance and FEMA became part of everyday lives. Just providing the basics of food and a dry bed were serious hurdles. As I write this article, four months have passed since the storm, and most of the displaced Sailors still are not back in their homes. People had serious issues, and their attention spans were getting shorter and shorter.

Outside forces also were at work at the same time. Funding for shore installations was drastically cut in the past few fiscal years. NAS Key West felt the pinch,

and in true navy fashion vowed to “do more with less.” Air-traffic controllers, transient-line personnel, and qualified maintainers for the station’s SAR helicopters were in short supply even before the storm hit. Already stretched thin, they were pushed to the breaking point after the storm.

The guys on the pointy end of the spear also were feeling pressure. NAS Key West opened for business about two and a half months after the hurricane, despite all of its problems. The Global War on Terrorism couldn’t wait, and the pointy-nosed guys had only one place to go for ACM training on the east coast, as they worked up to their deployments. The “det mentality” became even worse than usual at the air station, as practices were observed that wouldn’t even be imaginable back at the squadron’s home bases or underway. Aircraft were being serviced and de-serviced with Gatorade bottles. Fire bottles with no charge were used

for launches and recoveries on the flight line. FOD discipline was unacceptable. Unfortunately, there were even fewer people around to police the detachments. Another couple of holes in the Swiss cheese model fell into line.

In spite of these factors, operations continued uneventfully at NAS Key West until one fateful day in February. It was a cruel twist of fate that I personally kicked it all off. The station's two H-60s had been down for a very long time and flight time seemed like a

than getting them at North Island, Norfolk, or Jax. We were going to be down for a few days because of a stupid case of pilot error. Fortunately, we had responded to only one SAR since my arrival at the base, so I hoped we would be OK—I was dead wrong. All the holes in the block of cheese would fall into line that weekend.

The following Saturday, a detachment of Canadian CF-18s was flew in to begin training. Landing at dusk, the Hornets were directed to change runways while in the pattern. The new runway was 31, which has no

PAPI lights and no OLS. The approach end of 31 is right on the water, with little overrun. To make a long story short, the lead Hornet did a little mangrove trimming (literally), and took a good portion of the airfield's fence (which had just been repaired after Hurricane Wilma) with it. How that plane didn't end up a smoking hole is beyond me. As it turned out, he dinged his gear and his flap, and the Canadian

flight-safety officer had a mishap investigation on his hands. They don't teach you how to coordinate with foreign countries in ASO School. Fortunately, the Canadian FSO was very helpful, and I am waiting on their equivalent of an SIR to do yet another hazrep. This mishap was to be only the tip of the iceberg.

A bad week was getting worse, and there was more to come. The Monday following the Canadian incident it was unseasonably cool in the Keys—perfect weather for the formation of sonic booms. A reserve Hornet broke the sound barrier returning from one of the local working areas, and rattled more than a few windows



distant memory. When one of the birds finally came up, I got on the flight schedule and set out to get current in every area possible. One of these areas was confined-area landings (CAL). Even though I hadn't flown a CAL in many weeks, I picked a fairly challenging landing zone (LZ) and ended up dinging the tip caps on a couple of small branches. We didn't break threshold for a Class C, but I gave the flight doc some bodily fluids and swallowed a huge dose of personal pride. I broke out the 3750 again and started to write a hazrep. Even worse, we were back to having no up SAR birds. Getting replacement tip caps in Key West is significantly harder

in Key West. Although the FA-18 was far away from the island chain and broke no written rules, the sonic-boom-propagation conditions were just a little too good that day. We're still sorting out the fallout from that incident, and potential claims against the government. More importantly, there was a sonic-boom advisory issued for NAS Key West, but no one in the squadron was aware of it. In fact, the pilot had no idea the METOC folks even produced such a product for flight planning. But, there would be more on my plate. A Hornet crashed into the water three days later. Having no up SAR birds, we were unable to launch. Fortunately, a Coast Guard boat picked up the pilot, and he was not hurt that badly.

The weekend finally arrived, and everyone hoped that the following week would see operations return to normal. Unfortunately, things went from bad to worse. The following Tuesday we had an incident of controller error that resulted in a near miss on the runway between a P-3 and a T-34. The T-34 was shooting a TACAN to runway 7 just ahead of the P-3, which was shooting a PAR to runway 3. After landing and rolling out, the T-34 was cleared and turned off at midfield, crossing runway 7 in front of the P-3 as it crossed the threshold to do a touch-and-go. The resulting waveoff resulted in the P-3 overflying the T-34, low enough to get everyone's attention. As a result of this near miss, the ATC officer and I spent the better part of a week figuring out how to do an ATC hazrep on the new web-enabled-safety system (WESS).

Finally, to top it all off, a Marine Corps Hornet was lost the following Tuesday. This time, our SAR helo was able to pick up the pilot. Thankfully, he was OK. As you can imagine, the base CO's tolerance was maxed out. He ordered a safety standdown for the entire air station, including all detachments, to discuss the events of the preceding week and a half—there was a lot to talk about.

OK, let's recap. In two and a half weeks, we had a helo trim a pine tree, put two Hornets into the water, barely avoided making a smoking hole out of a third Hornet, rattled the windows of the entire island, and narrowly dodged a runway collision. What in the world was going on at NAS Key West? We had a little of everything in the mix: rotary-wing, TacAir, foreign-military forces, TraCom, ATC, MarPat, USN and USMC aircraft, and active and reserve units.

What was making everything come to a point in

such a short period of time? It wasn't just Key West that was having a tough time. In the preceding couple of weeks, the Navy had lost a T-34, a T-39, another Hornet, an SH-60B, and two H-53s. The CNO's goal of reducing mishaps by 50 percent was taking a major hit. As expected, many factors were at play. Stress from the hurricane recovery affected everyone at NAS Key West. With many Sailors still displaced and living in cramped temporary quarters, tempers were flaring, sleep patterns have been disrupted, and it has become difficult to focus at times.

The visiting squadrons also have been adversely affected. They are packed into the VQ like sardines, and many of the Key West liberty opportunities are not available to help them decompress after a stressful day of flying. The result is that the edge so necessary to operate naval aircraft has been dulled. Add to this the pressures of completing the required workups in the interdeployment training cycle (IDTC) and getting back to the front of the Global War on Terrorism. These pressures can often compromise safety if leadership is not constantly on guard. The fiscal restrictions placed on the entire Navy, particularly shore installations, in this era of shrinking budgets and privatization, may also have eroded safety margins as personnel have been reduced, and we've all been stretched thinner and thinner.

I revert to the CO's comments at ASO school. We definitely had a couple of weeks of sheer terror. I'm just glad no one seriously was hurt or killed. The lesson to take from all of this is that everyone, but especially leadership at all levels, has to stay sharp and focused at all times. As my XO is fond of saying, "Everyone is the safety officer."

At safety standdowns, I always tell the Sailors that naval aviation is not an inherently dangerous profession, but it is inherently unforgiving. Small errors can lead to not-so-small consequences. We have excellent procedures and safety programs to help prevent mishaps, but they are only as good as the people implementing them. Someone—no, make that everyone—has to be alert for the small deviations that can build into mishaps. In the modern Navy, safety is primarily a human-factors issue. That is as true at the macro NAS level as it is inside the cockpit. The recent events at NAS Key West and throughout the fleet make that statement abundantly clear. 

Lt. Doughit flies with NAS Key West.