

# IN THAT ORDER

*The decision to push through, in the hope of breaking out, turned out to be a bad idea.*

By Lt. Brandon Hunter

At the beginning of the NATOPS brief before every flight, the briefer usually says, “In the event of an emergency, the flying pilot will aviate, navigate and communicate, in that order...” or words to that effect. The brief I received that morning was no different.

Our mission was to provide an airborne, under-sea-warfare (USW) asset to the Submarine Commander’s Course (SCC), conducted at the Pacific Missile Range Facility (PMRF) off the coast of the Hawaiian island of Kauai. As the name implies, SCC evaluates a prospective commanding officer’s ability to tactically employ his submarine against surface, air, and subsurface USW units.

Our SH-60B would complement a surface group of a DDG, an FFG, and a Canadian FF. As a new helicopter second pilot (H2P), I would confront many firsts on this flight. So far in my short career, I never had taken part in an USW exercise, never conducted HAWK-link operations, and had never operated with any other surface and airborne units. For this exercise, HAWK link would

provide us a direct link to a ship to transmit real-time electronic and voice data.

The majority of our brief that morning focused on the tactical portion of the flight, which left us with just about five minutes to discuss weather and ORM. The weather forecast was typical for the Hawaiian area: isolated showers in and around the island chain. Because the weather was little cause for concern, we decided to transit from Marine Corps Base Hawaii (MCBH) to PMRF, with VFR flight following from Honolulu Center. As for ORM, we had a considerable amount of experience in the aircraft to make up for my inexperience. I was flying with a seasoned helicopter aircraft commander (HAC) and two AW chiefs (one being the squadron’s enlisted Seahawk weapons and tactics

instructor) in the cabin. The only hint of potential concern came from the HAC and one of the AWCs, who stated they recently had not been feeling well. However, both stated they were OK and ready to fly.

We departed MCBH and made the one-hour trip to PMRF. During the transit, we played the requisite “stump the H2P,” 21-question game. When we arrived at Kauai, we decided first to get fuel to maximize our range time. When our crewmen got out during the hot pump, they saw a popped corner fastener on our tail-rotor-gearbox cowling. We had to shut down after getting fuel to refasten it, per our SOP. Not only did this extra task cost us range time, but we lost our HAWK-link crypto because external power was not available. Because the HAC was not deck-landing qualification (DLQ) current, we could not get a deck hit on a ship and rekey the crypto. We now were forced to do coordinated USW without HAWK link. Instead of having real-time, electronic data link with the ship, we would have to pass all our information via the radio. Nothing on this flight seemed to be going right, and the entire crew was getting frustrated before we even made it to the exercise. We took off and headed to the exercise area, determined to give it our best.

When the event ended two hours later, our tired and frustrated crew headed back to MCBH. We hit the fuel pits at Barking Sands one last time, hoping to make it through unscathed. While the aircraft cooperated, one of the AWCs (the same one who had been under the weather) got sick in the fuel pits. The HAC also started to feel less than stellar. After discussing our situation, our crew decided everyone still was safe to fly, and we started home.

I flew the aircraft to give the HAC a break; he had flown most of the flight thus far. The flight was quiet. We were a tired and weary crew looking forward to getting out of the aircraft. About 15 miles from home, we ran into one of those isolated rain showers we had discussed in our brief. We contacted tower, and they still were calling the field VMC. We elected to continue on course rules, trying to make it through the deteriorating weather, instead of having to get picked up for the lengthy PAR. The visibility continued to drop, and we decided we could go further. Just as we began to turn around to maintain VMC, the “ENG FIRE” light on the master-warning panels illuminated, along with the No. 1 engine T-handle. NATOPS states that sunlight filtered through smoke or haze may activate the fire-detection system, but because of the overcast and rain, this should

not have been the cause.

“In the case of an emergency, the flying pilot will aviate, navigate, then communicate...” Well, we forgot all about that. Almost immediately, all eyes up front were on the brilliant red “ENG FIRE” light and the engine instruments. Our two AWCs fixated on the engine cowling, trying to confirm the fire. As a result of our fixation, we flew into the heavy rain we had been trying to avoid. Instead of just having one EP to worry about, we had given ourselves another by going inadvertent IMC.

The crew quickly refocused, and the CRM juices started to flow again. Immediately, the HAC got on the instruments and turned to a safe heading, while the AWCs and I worked on confirming the fire. Because we had no secondary fire indications, we did not pull the fire T-handles or activate either extinguisher bottle. We reported our situation to tower and coordinated a PAR to get us back on deck.

We made an uneventful landing, and as soon as we touched down, the “ENG FIRE” light went out. We taxied back to our line and shut down. The erroneous fire indication was caused by a faulty fire detector.

Valuable CRM lessons were learned from this flight. The decision to push through, in the hope of breaking out, turned out to be a bad idea. We thought we were saving time by pushing through the weather, but because of our poor decision-making, we actually had extended our time in the air. Had we simply decided to fly the PAR from the beginning, we would have been lined up on final when the “ENG FIRE” light came on. Why take the risk and push through when a PAR readily was available?

Had we flown like we briefed, we much sooner would have determined the fire light was a false indication. Instead, our momentary loss of situational awareness forced us to aviate and navigate ourselves out of inadvertent IMC.

Finally, at the end of a challenging mission, with two under-the-weather aircrew and everyone feeling fatigued, we had allowed ourselves to become complacent in anticipation of getting out of the aircraft. What could go wrong five miles from home? When things go wrong, they always will go wrong at the moment that’s least convenient. While I began the flight thinking I would learn valuable lessons about real-world USW, I ended the flight learning a much more valuable lesson about the basics: Aviate, navigate, and communicate. Brief the flight, and then fly the brief. 🛩️

Lt.Hunter flies with HSL-37.