

Don't Ask, Don't

A ship's standing orders called for the OOD or XO to brief the CO anytime he walked on the bridge, but that didn't happen. Likewise, the CO didn't ask for a report on the operational picture. That lack of situational awareness led to some equipment being damaged and lost and some Sailors being injured when their RHIB was swamped by screw wash.

This incident happened while a ship was on station in the North Arabian Gulf, conducting maritime interdiction operations (MIO) in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The area was a deep-water anchorage for several large tankers and cargo vessels, waiting to be boarded or to be authorized entry into port.

At the start of this evolution, one vessel was approximately 1,000 yards off the Navy ship's port bow, with another anchored about 1,200 yards off the starboard bow. The Navy ship's course was 235 degrees, and the engines were at all stop. The wind was on the starboard bow; the current (2 knots) was setting the ship to starboard, resulting in a 258 course over ground.

Everything was OK as the Sailors manned the port boat deck to lower a RHIB for transporting one of the ship's visit, board, search, and seizure (VBSS) teams to the vessel on the port bow. The ship's deck department lowered the RHIB without incident and moved it to the port-side fantail to embark the VBSS team.

During the time this team was being embarked, the ship slowly was being set down on the vessel on its starboard bow. About 10 of the 13 VBSS members had boarded the RHIB when the ship's CO appeared on the bridge.

Seeing his ship being set down on the anchored vessel, the ship's CO ordered, "Hard right rudder." The OOD, however, told the CO if he was concerned about being set down on the anchored vessel, he should order a left rudder. The CO then ordered the conning officer to shift the rudder.



Navy photo by PH1 Greg Messier

Upon being informed the ship was at all stop, the CO ordered, "All engines ahead one-third for five knots." Shortly thereafter, he ordered a port twist (starboard engine ahead two-thirds and port engine back one-third). The OOD immediately informed the CO that the RHIB still was tied up along the port-side fantail, which caused the CO to order, "All engines stop."

Momentarily, the XO (on hydra radio with the fantail) called away "man overboard" over the 1MC. Screw wash from the port screw during the port-twist maneuver had caused water to flow over the RHIB's sponson, and the craft capsized. Ten VBSS-team members and three boat-crew members had been thrown into the water.

The ship launched the starboard RHIB and recovered all hands. Four VBSS-team members suffered minor injuries, and the port RHIB sustained minor damage to the bridge-to-bridge radio and electrical system. One 12-gauge shotgun, 600 rounds of M60 ammunition, and 90 rounds of 12-gauge ammunition also were lost when boarding-team members jettisoned them.

What are the lessons learned from this mishap?

Tell



Navy photo by PH1 Bart Bauer

Navy photo by PHAN Rex Nelson



The critical point of failure was the CO not having the full operational picture when he came on the bridge. Had the OOD or XO briefed him when he first arrived (as required by standing orders), or had the CO asked for a report, he would have known about the RHIB's location and the VBSS team's embarkation in progress. This knowledge undoubtedly would have precluded his ordering the port twist that ultimately swamped the RHIB.

When this incident occurred, the ship had been conducting multiple VBSS boardings each day for about two weeks in close proximity to numerous anchored vessels. It's likely a sense of normality or complacency had developed that allowed inherently dangerous operations to become routine.

To ensure there are no recurrences, all tactical watchstanders (including OODs, conning officers, CIC watch officers, and tactical-action officers) aboard the ship thoroughly reviewed the CO's standing orders. They discussed the implications of allowing themselves to get complacent while operating in dangerous situations.

The ship also implemented a new standing order for small-boat operations to ensure positive control of all internal and external variables that affect safe operations. The new standing order cautions against using any backing bell while embarking or debarking personnel. ■