



The Initial Approach Fix

The Blue THREAT

By Capt. Ken Neubauer

Picture this scenario: You are in a training meeting in your squadron ready room. The safety officer stands up and tells how the squadron is doing to keep your Sailors or Marines safe, and the things you need to do to make sure you are not the next victim of a mishap. Do you listen? Does the aviation-safety officer (ASO) carry the credibility to command your attention and change your thinking? Is your safety officer a hot-runner, hand-picked by the CO to lead a charge?

When I wore a younger man's rank, the answer to each of these questions typically was a resounding no. The safety officer's pitch was just more of the same, utterly predictable, and I rarely listened. After all, the safety officer was supposed to talk about safety. That was his job.

Let's alter the scenario. Let's say you are in the same training meeting, but, this time, your training officer, the strike-fighter-tactics instructor (SFTI) or the weapons and tactics instructor (WTI), stands up and begins to speak. Do you listen now? The answer likely is yes. Not just yes, but absolutely. Why? For the same reasons cited before: The training officer carries credibility, is likely hand-picked to lead a charge, and he is talking about tactics—stuff you like and want to talk about.

What if we were to get these two guys together as a team? What if training officers and the safety officers both talked tactics? From my former seat as director of the Naval School of Aviation Safety, that prospect was but a dream—a distant land far away, across a treacherous sea filled with cultural dragons.

Then, on a clear California morning two-and-half-years ago, that vision materialized with a single phone call from an innovative Marine Corps tactician, who just happened to be the commanding officer of Marine Corps Weapons and Tactics Squadron One (MAWTS-1). Col. Jon "Dog" Davis said, "Nubs, can you help me develop a two-day course in safety and risk management that could be presented to the future weapons and tactics instructors (WTIs) of the Marine Corps?"

You might imagine my reaction. I calmly replied, "Sure," as I tried to keep myself from falling out of a third-story window while leaping for joy. Finally, naval aviation was about to get our brightest tactical minds engaged in the fight against our deadliest enemy: ourselves.

The vision that came from the School of Aviation Safety (SAS) and MAWTS-1 partnership was to treat the causes of mishaps as threats in the same way we deal with protected targets or enemy fighters: You defeat threats with sound tactics. When you start talking tactics to warfighters, they tend to listen.

Think of the energy we put toward winning battles with potential foes. We go to tremendous lengths to devise tactics against them. We train and modify our tactics, depending on the part of the world, the time of year, and the time of day we expect to fight. These warfighting tactics are developed and practiced by our forces, our blue forces, to defeat that anticipated force. We often refer to this opposing force as a red force or Red Threat. In my 20 plus years' involvement in naval aviation, I was able to employ red-threat tactics, for real, one time for a period of five weeks. The world has

changed a bit in the last five years, but I think it's safe to say our naval aviators' exposure to red forces is, by any stretch, limited.

Now, let's take this same mindset and apply it to hazards. What if we were to view the hazards we face every day, in training or in our everyday activities, as threats? Take marginal weather for example. Bad weather is a hazard to the success of our operations. Do we have measures or controls in place to minimize the risk to mission success or loss of assets posed by bad weather? Certainly, they are our tactics against a known threat. How about fatigue, or inexperienced aircrew flying together? We need to view these as threats to our ability to accomplish our missions in the same way we view a weapon in the hands of someone in violent disagreement to our way of thinking. These are the Blue Threats, threats or hazards we create or are under our control to modify their effects.

History shows that, even in the face of combat conditions, we lose far more of our forces to Blue Threats than we ever do to Red Threats. Think of all the aircraft crashes, injured personnel, or damage to equipment that occur during training. These losses, more times than not, have nothing to do with the actions of an opposing force. They are, in the vast majority of cases, due to our most deadly Blue Threat: human error.

To defeat Blue Threats, we need sound tactics. One key tactic is operational risk management. ORM is a process, a tactic, to manage the risk posed by the threats or hazards we face in preparing to meet an enemy force, or in our everyday activities. ORM will ring with the warfighter, with the risk-taker, if viewed in this manner.

From these seeds sprang the Tactical Risk Management (TRM) course at MAWTS-1. The goals of this effort are:

- To reach the warfighter, to bring a mindset of safety and risk management as a force multiplier and enhancer to combat effectiveness.
- To bring concepts that typically were viewed

as mundane and burdensome safety initiatives to the interest of our hard-charging warfighters.

- To enlist leading-edge junior Marine aviators in the fight to reduce losses from mishaps.

This course presents our losses due to mishaps as the result of not properly attacking the Blue Threat. The Blue-Threat Concept now has been part of WTI training for two years. Many not so subtle indicators show the Blue-Threat concept is taking root in the minds of our finest Marine aviators and is expanding to other communities.

Perceiving the hazards we face everyday, in training and in our personal lives, as threats, Blue Threats, is the first step to changing the current, widely varied cultural perceptions of ORM. ORM is a tactic to prevent unnecessary losses in our force. We use this tactic because we understand the loss of one of our Sailors or Marines, whether to an enemy bullet or an automobile crash caused by extreme fatigue at the end of a long car trip, has the same impact on unit readiness and morale. It has the same impact on the family of that Sailor or Marine. The only difference is the nature of the threat that caused the loss; one threat is red, the other blue. One we may see a couple times in a career, the other we will face every single day. Tactics are needed to defeat both. ORM is a Blue-Threat tactic.

What Blue Threats do you face each day, whether flying, driving, working or playing? What are the risks posed by those threats? Will you accept those risks or reduce them by developing and executing sound tactics? Who will lead those tactics and watch for changes? Do these questions sound familiar? Seems a lot like identifying hazards, accessing hazards, making risk decisions, implementing controls, and supervising. Sounds a lot like ORM. Our best tactical minds now are engaged in our most desperate fight: To eliminate losses from the Blue Threats we face every day. Will you be part of that fight? Will you lead that fight? 

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