

Our air wing was participating in the U.K.-sponsored Joint Maritime Course (JMC) in the waters north of Scotland. It was June 2001, and this NATO exercise was billed as the best post-cold-war NATO exercise around, offering superlative training in every major warfare area.

Two unforgettable circumstances marked this exercise. The first was that, because of the summer solstice, it never got completely dark (a good news story for me and

Once on deck, we called the carrier and were told she still had VFR conditions. I took a three-potato count and told the DDG to load the passengers. I didn't realize I was rationalizing, but indeed I was. I told myself what I had flown through was a localized fog bank, and I could just pop right back through it under positive control of the DDG and be on my way. My gut was saying something else. Since it was nowhere near chow time, I attributed the uncomfortable feeling in my midriff to



Trust Your Guts

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Photo by Ted Carlson
Composite

the rest of the “O-4 and above” crowd). The second was the miserable weather. While constant fog and rain made the warfare much more challenging, it also made routine business anything but.

I was launched on a VOD mission to a DDG. En route, the visibility began to decrease. As it came down, so did we. At 5 miles from the DDG, we basically were air taxiing our helo toward the ship. However, the ship reported they were 500 overcast, with 2 miles visibility. We requested an SCA (my first actual) and conducted an uneventful approach. Sure enough, at 2.5 DME, the visibility markedly improved.

the fact I was sitting on a surface combatant, and, like Pavlov's dogs, I was expecting to be fed a box lunch.

We launched (minus the box lunches) and punched through the fog bank. However, 10 minutes later, as the distance to mom decreased, so did the weather. In fact, it got ugly faster than it did earlier, and, as I checked in with our tower, I was told they were now in-and-out of 0/0 and to contact approach. Since I was flying with another HAC, we simply cinched down the safety straps and looked at each other with an expression (you in multi-piloted aircraft know what I mean) similar to the anxious look of expected flatulence. As I then turned around and gave our passen-

gers my best John Wayne thumbs-up, I remember thinking, “No sweat, this is like driving into Wisconsin.”

We continued, slowly descending below the falling ceiling as we attempted to contact approach, which eventually came up and apologized for not being at the ready. They explained the ongoing RAS between mom and the AOE next door had allowed them to stand down for maintenance. They promptly reported us under positive control and told us to climb to 500 feet.

I no sooner rogered-up and began the climb when my gut had its second moment. I remember feeling dread

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as I lost sight of the frothy waters and went popeye at 150 feet. Only five minutes later, while cruising inbound on the assigned radial in the thickest IMC of my career, approach told us they had dropped lock. Moments later, at 4 DME, they declared their gadget bent and asked that I find VFR. Nice joke—if only it had been. I was now at 3 DME and had a moment of panic. I knew mom was unreppling or recently had finished, and I also knew her shotgun CG was close by. That made three ships nearby, and I had a TACAN-lock on only one. At that moment, approach called and asked me to call my position off the CVN. I did and then commenced the most interesting approach of my life. Based on my calls of radial and DME, approach talked me through a “normal approach” pattern, giving ASR calls on final. A nice story if only it had ended there.

At 200 feet and 1.2 DME, I still was popeye and was about to call a missed approach when I looked through my chin bubble and saw the wake of the ship. I called, “Wake in sight,” and was cleared to continue the contact approach. This was the first time I had the chance to check my airspeed. I was hot, but, at .8 miles, I had room to decelerate. I slowed the helo, but my gut chirped in for the third time. Fortunately, I listened this time and looked up and saw the fantail of the AOE fill my windscreen. I instantly realized my error; the DME I was reading belonged to the aircraft carrier, but the

wake I was following belonged to the AOE, which was then falling astern of the CVN. The carrier was in the midst of her breakaway maneuver. I banked hard left to avoid the AOE, and, before I could thank my guts for looking up, I was cruising over the CVN’s LA from right to left at 40 knots and 20 feet. The two ships disappeared as quickly as they appeared. Since I now had the water clearly in sight, I rapidly put in a quickstop recovery and entered a high hover. My copilot, in the right seat, said he could make out the carrier through the fog 400 yards to starboard. I passed him the controls, and he sidestepped us aboard. As we shutdown and began our quiet acknowledgements of gratitude to the big guy upstairs, my legs began to get wobbly. I could not figure out how this situation had gotten so far and so rapidly out of control.

We debriefed and went down to CATCC. We spoke to our controller, who still had our position’s dry erase marks drawn across his screen like a child’s connect-the-dots game. We thanked him but wondered how control of the situation had gotten away from all of us.

I could have decided, before we penetrated the fog bank the first time and as we closed the DDG, to abort and return to base. But I was being a team player and elected to proceed.

When the visibility started to decrease and I was instructed to climb, I could have requested to remain special VFR and proceed inbound direct.

Finally, once the gadget went down, I should have slowed down to max-conserve airspeed, giving myself and approach a chance to correct the problem or think of a better alternative than drawing glyphs on the scope.

Approach, on the other hand, could have told us to anchor where we were and had us switch up strike. This would have given us the surface picture, kept us clear of surface contacts, allowed approach time to get their bearings, and made sure their gadget was FMC before initiating my climb.

Regardless, I should have listened to the nagging voice within and slowed down the situation. My desire to be a team player and my predisposition to accept this situation as nothing unusual nearly cost me and others aboard our lives. I have learned my lesson and modified some habits. How? Well, as my father likes to say, “You’re only paranoid if you are wrong.”

Let me add my professional twist to his adage: “Remember, you always have situational awareness until you suddenly, and abruptly, realize you don’t. The bottom line: Trust your guts.” 

LCdr. Molinari flies with HS-3.