



# BUFFOONERY

By LCdr. Gabe Soltero

Buffoonery—that’s what’s killing us these days. We’ve become quite good at taking out the bad guys, putting bombs through windows, and seeing it all on TV. We pride ourselves on projecting our power in a way that tells the world we’re still No. 1. No one is better at this business than we are—of that, there is no question. So, why do we hesitate to apply the same amount of effort to the training environment? Isn’t one of our favorite mottos that we “train like we fight”?

# The pressure to return to the ship, combined with the pressure we placed on ourselves to complete the mission, ultimately led us to head over the dark ocean.

I don't pretend to know the answer, but events from the other night were all too typical of the pressures we place upon ourselves to complete the mission—ORM be damned. Having recently graduated from aviation safety school, these thoughts of self-induced pressure were all too present in my mind as I shook my head in disbelief: Why are we doing this?

The mission wasn't an unusual scenario, and perhaps that's the scariest part. We had two helicopters forward deployed ashore from the carrier during a training exercise, simulating operations at a theater near you. The mission was a night combat-SAR exercise in the desert, followed by a shipboard recovery. This mission is perhaps the most challenging we train for. With that thought in mind, we planned accordingly, doing our best to avoid potential pitfalls.

The execution was far from flawless, but we made it happen and recovered the air-wing folks who'd been shivering in the desert for hours. Now came the easy part, right? All we had to do was get some gas and hustle back to the boat to make our overhead. Here's where we let our hubris get the best of us.

The mission had gotten off to a late start. We already were running behind schedule as we headed for home, and we still had to get gas before going feet wet. As our crew hustled to load all our detachment's gear on the two helos, we gassed up and got information on the ship's position.

At this point, we'd been flying for five hours and faced another 1.5 or so before we could call it a night. The previous day also had been a long one for both crews, with each logging more than eight hours.

Considering the gear we were loading and our fuel, we'd be at max gross weight for takeoff. The airfield gave us an updated position, using the card of the day, which jibed with what we'd gotten earlier in the day. But, here's the kicker; the ship's TACAN would not be operating because of an EMCON drill—a drill!

Here we were, tired from a long and difficult mission, late for our overhead, with a heavy aircraft, about to fly over 150 miles of ocean to a ship that would be hiding—on purpose. We voiced our concerns to the ground controllers at the field, who were on the phone

with the boat. We identified this very real hazard, weighing the training value of an EMCON drill against the safe recovery of two tired crews.

Ground control relayed back something along the lines of "duly noted" and asked for an ETD, which, to us, translated as, "Why aren't you already on the way?" The pilots, all four of us safety-school grads, got the message.

The pressure to return to the ship, combined with the pressure we placed on ourselves to complete the mission, ultimately led us to head over the dark ocean. With a hard bingo set, we climbed to 5,000 feet, asked FACSFAC for vectors to the ship (which were about 30 minutes time-late), and continued outbound. Uneasy at the prospect of having to divert if we couldn't find the carrier, we joked about how this scenario would be great for an aircraft-commander board. We also hoped that the controller, who had given us the ship's position, had the same card of the day as we did.

About 25 miles out, the lead helo coaxed the carrier into talking to us on the radio. Relieved at having comms and a visual on the CVN, we set up for an NVG sidestep approach and recovered without incident. The time was 0145.

Why did we do this? Because we all want to be *that* guy. We want to be the pilot who can hack the mission and not let down the squadron. Doing otherwise would be perceived as a sign of weakness, either by our peers, ourselves, or our chain of command. It's how we're wired as aviators. It's also what sometimes leads us to make bad decisions.

We should have called it a night once we got to the airfield—which, by the way, is our home field—and coordinated flying to the ship the following morning. We didn't delay because our birds were needed for a mission early the next day. Our get-the-job-done breeding got the best of us. The carrier's unwise decision to have an EMCON drill while two aircraft flew to a spot in the ocean did not help matters.

Buffoonery: otherwise smart people making bad decisions. Let's not do this again, OK? 

LCdr. Soltero flies with HS-4.