

Sins of the Father



By LCdr. Sean P. McDermott

While in the FRS in 1995, I was riding in the back of a C-2 as a student during an FCLP hop when I heard a loud noise. It sounded like something striking the side of the fuselage. I notified the aircraft commander on ICS and was surprised when he responded, “The HF antenna has separated from the rudder and is hitting the fuselage. If we land, we will not be able to use reverse thrust, because NATOPS states we might bring the antenna into the prop and cause a missile hazard.” He added, “What we need to do is have you open the ditching hatch and, with your helmet and gloves on, stick your upper body out into the air stream and pull in the antenna.”

That flight was 10 years ago. I still can’t remember if I had my FRS instructor repeat himself more than once, but, reluctantly, with a fellow student holding my legs, I stuck my body out into the wind stream and pulled the antenna into the aircraft. This event marked my introduction to the C-2 community.

Fast forward a few years, and roughly eight similar HF incidents, to my stint as officer in charge of a C-2 detachment. I brought an aircraft on cruise that had an unusual propensity to lose its HF antenna, having lost several during our cruise.

My most memorable antenna event was during a distinguished-visitor mission, when we had to ask a diplomat to get up from his seat while an aircrewman retrieved the antenna.

This same aircraft and my growing complacency culminated in another memorable moment on my fly-in from cruise. As the aircraft commander, I certainly was responsible for the mission, but I fell into a false sense of security because I was flying with my operations officer. My Ops O never had missed a beat during eight months of cruise. Still, he was green, having never yet needed an HF radio to talk to ATC.

After a downing discrepancy that required an extensive fix, we launched from NAS Bermuda for our return leg to NAS Norfolk. When ATC asked us to switch to HF for our transatlantic flight, my Ops O and I shared a

look as we each thought, “This aircraft doesn’t have an antenna. It hasn’t been replaced because it has a history of coming off.”

We ended up flying in poor weather, across the Atlantic, through the Bermuda Triangle, at night, and NORDDO for almost an hour.

The C-2 community operates an airframe that just has celebrated its 40th anniversary. Over the years, problems have been fixed by developing work-arounds. The HF antenna separating is a case in point. If I were the reader of this article, I’d be thinking, “What an idiot you are!” No arguments here, but it turns out I’m not alone.

After my cruise, a ready-room discussion revealed there wasn’t an aircraft commander in the command who hadn’t sent an aircrewman out into 120 knots of wind to retrieve an antenna. The fact the community work-around hadn’t made it into NATOPS meant that, while the practice commonly was accepted, you would be on your own if something went wrong during the maneuver.

Following my OinC tour, I found myself stationed at NavAir. At an integrated-logistics-support-management- team (ILSMT) meeting, I was being briefed on how the fleet-support team was working on a fix for the E-2 HF-antenna problem. Naively, I asked if they were endeavoring to fix the C-2 HF-antenna problem, as well. I quickly was told that not only were they not planning to fix the C-2 HF-antenna problem, but the fix for the E-2 antenna was to make it exactly like the C-2 antenna that has no recorded history of failing.

I’ve found religion. Mea culpa... mea culpa... mea culpa. Documentation is the only cure for fleet work-arounds. A dedicated team of highly trained professionals works incessantly to provide the warfighter with the tools to project power for national interests. This awesome team can only work issues they know about. Assume nothing, document everything, take an active role in making our Navy the best in the world. 🦅

LCdr. McDermott flew with VRC-40.