

## Stack the Deck



By LCdr. Hillary Darby

The events all started with a phone call during the first week of counter-drug operations. What promised to be a routine fly-day of hunting down bad guys quickly turned into a helicopter-aircraft-commander (HAC) board scenario.

Initially, the briefing details were sketchy: We had a possible medevac of a Sailor with an infection that appeared to be under control, and the closest town was Aca-

pulco, Mexico, 250 miles away. As the morning passed, the details crystallized. There were no good airports beyond Acapulco, the infection was spreading to the sinuses and could result in meningitis, the patient was stabilized but degrading, and the clock was ticking.

All four pilots were a whirlwind of activity. As we collectively brainstormed, fingers flew on FalconView (a mapping system used for mission planning), charts were spread haphazardly across the wardroom table, and lists were generated. Fortunately, we had an

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invaluable asset in the embarked Coast Guard law enforcement detachment (LEDet), who provided firsthand knowledge of the local airport we were considering.

Now, here's the deviation from the typical HAC board scenario—the weather was perfect. Once the decision was made to medevac the young Sailor, the ship immediately began closing to within SOP range to land. CIC personnel started to work the diplomatic-clearance message and coordinated with embassy personnel. The medical folks made phone calls to make sure the local husbanding agent was on hand to assist with transporting the patient to the hospital. The Coast Guard LEDet provided a qualified flight observer who was an EMT and was fluent in Spanish. As a bonus, the ship provided GPS waypoints where they would be upon our return.

How much better could this get? It did get better. After waiting impatiently for embassy approval, we launched with several hours of daylight remaining and at a relatively close 110 miles. Through the miracle of ducting, we maintained Hawlink the entire way. We also provided a FLIR teaser shot of the beach and airport to CIC watchstanders on our approach. Tower provided directions to the ramp, and we turned our patient over to medical personnel. We began our transit back to the ship just after sunset.

At this point in the story, we usually hear about the building storm clouds, the near-empty gas gauge, and the radios mysteriously gone dead—not this time. We headed toward our first waypoint, hoping to obtain radar contact. The ship was exactly where it said it would be. The most drama we had was trying to reestablish comms with mom. But, with a radar blip, TACAN lock, and three hours of gas, what was the hurry?

Comms were quickly restored, and we coordinated for our recovery. By this time, it was dark. We were unaided, and our aircraft had been not-mission-capable (NMC) for most of the transit. This was my first night recovery underway. I thought of all the night shipboard-approach discussions I'd been tasked to spearhead as a former ASO and the mishap reports I'd read regarding this critical phase of flight.

We performed a little on-the-spot ORM. We reviewed the checkpoints and emphasized everyone's role in the cockpit. We discussed how easy it would be to get into the "black hole" and stressed the importance of feedback with regard to altitude and airspeed. As "briefed," I got low and slow, but my copilot and crewman were right there to back me up. Although the approach wasn't pretty, it never was unsafe because the crew was ahead of the aircraft.

I now arrive at the point of this cautionary tale: Do not ever get fooled by the mundane, especially when it comes on the heels of a real adventure. As aviators, we do a good job briefing the "sexy" missions. The evolutions that are redundant often breed complacency. The simple act of anticipating ways I could screw up the approach and then articulating them prepared the crew to be one step ahead. The difference between a mishap and a safe recovery often lies in the situational awareness of the entire aircrew. Taking a moment to make the most of "time-critical ORM" is an easy way to stack the deck in your favor every time. 🦅

LCdr. Darby flies with HSL-37.

*Another huge advantage is working with professionals, including, in this case, BM1 L. Nieves of LEDet 108 PACTACLET, and personnel aboard the USS Reuben James (FFG-57). — the author.*