

# ORM Corner

## ORMir

by Lt. Steve Firestone

Early into my nugget cruise, I had a chance to experience something that I had heard about only in flight school: a lightning storm over the Arabian Gulf.

Our flight was supposed to be a routine SSC-MIO mission. After receiving our brief in CIC, we conducted our NATOPS brief. When the subject of the weather came up, we discussed the lightning that we could see off to the east. Our tasking was to work to the west, so we didn't feel the weather would pose a problem.

As we hot-seated the aircraft, the off-going crew said the lightning shouldn't be a factor since it was well off to the east. We lifted off and were assigned a search area to the southwest. We kept track of the storm and determined it was not moving toward homeplate. The SH-60B doesn't have a weather radar, but it can track moderate to heavy storms. Our tracking, combined with the ship's

weather update, seemed favorable, so we proceeded north on our next assigned mission.

The transit took about 20 minutes, and we stayed on station for another 20 minutes before heading back. The weather looked fine, but we could see, both visually and on the radar, that two storm cells were beginning to move west toward our ship. We decided to proceed back to the ship at max blast to beat the storms. The radar showed two distinct cells advancing quickly. The storms appeared too large to circumnavigate, but we could see a path in between them.

About 10 minutes from the ship, the light show began. Lightning flashed on either side of us and appeared to be closing in. The storms seemed to

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# ing the Storm



extend for miles. The HAC decided to bring on the auxiliary power unit in case we lost the main generators. We also established that the pilot at the controls (me at the time) should keep his eyes inside, while the other pilot should scan outside and navigate through the two competing lightning storms. We also discussed turning on the thunderstorm utility lights but decided against it, since we'd be landing soon and would need our night vision for landing.

The awkward silence in the cockpit showed the entire crew was uncomfortable. We quickly went over what could happen and how we would handle each problem. We navigated back, making small corrections based on what we saw outside

and what the radar indicated, trying to stay in the middle of those two giant storms. We called the ship, told them our situation, and asked them to set flight quarters so we could land a little early. They managed to get us a green deck just as we rolled final, with lightning still flashing around us.

Once on deck, we let out a collective sigh of relief and debriefed what had just occurred. We agreed that the only thing we could have done was to decide not to fly when we saw the lightning way off to the north. NATOPS says, "Avoid flight through or near thunderstorms," and this is sound advice. But there may come a time when you have no choice, or the storm may form without your knowledge. Good ORM techniques will help you decide whether or not the flight you are preparing for is worth flying.

It always pays to keep track of the weather around the ship. Use whatever assets you have (radar, PIREPS) to stay on top of the weather. If lightning hits your aircraft, NATOPS says to expect to lose all electrical power. Be prepared to bring up utility lights and other emergency lighting at night. Also be prepared for electrical engine controls to kick off. This will require a quick reaction to prevent engine overspeed or overtemp. Consider how the lights are going to affect your night vision.

ORM will help you handle any light shows the weather sends your way. 

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Photo-composite by Patricia Eaton