

ORM Corner

Is It Live, or Is It Memorex?

by LCdr. Dabney Kern

Within a month after reporting back to LAMPS for my second sea tour, I was assigned as the detachment OinC on a grueling, two-month outing that was certain to test not only my leadership abilities, but, more importantly, my credit card limit. We were spending a week in New York City for Fleet Week and a week in Newport, then making two long visits to Halifax and a week stop-over in Boston to celebrate Independence Day. As I said, brutal. Right away I knew why the command couldn't find someone with more experience to take the job.

Some bonus training was thrown in. Sandwiched between the visits to Halifax during the latter part of the cruise was a multinational exercise—MARCOT—pitting several international naval forces against one another in a war-at-sea exercise (WASEX). This exercise was to last just a few weeks, but being one of only two helicopters on the orange force, our detachment anticipated flying the bulk of our flight-hour allocation during the WASEX, which conveniently wrapped up at the end of the fiscal year.

Our mission was simple: stay out of trouble, fly our

allocation, and participate in MARCOT. Since I was the squadron's junior OinC, I didn't want to screw up a no-brainer.

We started out flying just what we needed to stay proficient prior to MARCOT. En route, ATMs were depleted, plastic was melted, and liberty incidents miraculously were avoided. Life was good.

Finally, MARCOT was upon us. Leaving Halifax and the marathon tactics briefings behind, we loaded up on rubber bullets and simulated missiles. We had saved our hours, we had prepared for this moment, and we were ready.

The weather, however, was not. All the training and flight-hour calculations could not have prepared us for what we were up against: fog. And not just any fog, Nova Scotia fog. Fog you could cut with a knife. Thickest fog any of us on board had ever seen. There was nothing we could do. The embarked AGC said it could stay for days, even weeks. We were dejected and miserable.

As the days counted down, the end of the quarter grew closer, and we still had gobs of flight hours to get rid of. The blue forces stood poised to kick our butt, and we could do nothing about it. The battle-group air coordinator intended to task us to the max if the weather ever cleared, but, goo-wise, there was no end in sight. I was getting close to throwing in the towel and giving our flight hours back. Oh, the grief I'd catch from home guard.

Just as I was dialing the skipper's number, the AGC brought me some mixed news on the fifth day of fog. There was to be a clearing for a few days, and then the fog would set back in. I grew optimistic and formed an aggressive plan to fly around the clock when the weather broke. The detachment was getting stir crazy, and the pilots were ready to fly. Everyone committed themselves to this plan with enthusiasm.

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Please send your questions, comments or recommendations to Mr. John Mahoney or to Capt. Dennis M. Faherty, Director, Operational Risk Management. Mr. Mahoney's address is: Code 08, Naval Safety Center, 375 A St., Norfolk, VA 23511-4299. (757) 444-3520, ext. 7310 (DSN 584). E-mail: jmahoney@safetycenter.navy.mil

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A quick reapplication of ORM theory made it all too easy. The benefit: flight hours and training. The risk: death.

Photo-composite by Allan Amen

The AGC had nailed it on the head, and by the end of fog day number six, a hole appeared in the haze. In the midst of excitement and energy, we took to the skies. After a bumpy start, the weather held, and we continued to fly around the clock for the better part of two days. The hours were coming down, the ship was kicking some butt, and the blue forces were getting beat.

Unfortunately, so were the pilots. They made mistakes. Decisions that are normally simple were difficult. Landings were sloppy, and flight discipline waned. Fog was always a possibility, yet we launched anyway. Having done around-the-clock ops for two days straight and approaching a third, we had made enough little mistakes to cause the image of a falling domino to form in my mind. One more mistake, and the remaining pieces would fall. I decided to call a meeting to sanity-check my vision with the other aircrew members and found I wasn't alone. Each member knew we were pushing the envelope, but none had voiced their concerns.

Everyone felt there was apparent pressure from home guard—and from me—to perform while we were in MARCOT. The message they were getting was clear: we had been on this lollipop cruise for six weeks, got socked in with weather for a seventh, and now, finally, it was time to shut up and fly the hours. This wasn't the time to complain about crew rest or bad weather. To them, this was the eleventh hour. As one of them put it, they thought I wanted them to “suck it up for few days ‘cause this is what we came here for.”

Well, shame on me for allowing that message to get through, and shame on them for accepting it. It took that meeting to completely snap us out of it. A quick reapplication of ORM theory made it all too easy. The benefit: flight hours and training. The risk: death.



Many of us still remember the Memorex commercials where the consumer had to discern between what was real and what was not. I used that slogan to pull our heads back into reality and learned a valuable lesson in the process: during today's peace-time training, very seldom do the benefits warrant pushing the envelope. If a rubber bullet or imaginary missile is fired in error during a training exercise, they can always rewind the tapes and try again. On the other hand, the flying we do is dangerous. There's no rewinding the tapes. It's real, and it's always live.

Stay aware of the difference. After an exercise, you don't come home to a hero's welcome, but you can still come home in a casket. 🚰

LCdr. Kern flies with HSL-48.