

# Other Than That,



Andi Thomas stands beside the damaged aircraft she and her dad were in when it collided with another plane upon landing.

## How

Story and photos by LCdr. Gary M. Thomas, USCG,  
Maintenance & Logistics Command, Atlantic

I spent my latest vacation with family in Pensacola, Ocala, and Saint Augustine, Florida. I thought about flying to the various stops from New Jersey, but after considering the time I would have to spend in airports and getting rental cars, I decided it just didn't make sense. Instead, I drove—all 2,800 miles of it.

Now, you young, single folks probably are screaming, “Road trip to Florida!”

And I'm screaming, “Lord, please don't let anything happen to me that will end up as a story in one of those safety magazines!”

As you toss things in the back of the car, I'm plotting the route in MapQuest, which doesn't miss the high-end hotels.

You're thinking, “I can make it in 18 hours by driving straight through.

I'm thinking, “Does the hotel have a pool for my 12-year-old daughter, Andi Elizabeth?”

Obviously, we're talking about different approaches to a long trip. While I didn't sit down with Andi and go through the five steps of operational risk management (ORM), and we didn't create a risk matrix, I did think about what could go wrong on the trip. Remember, the last thing I wanted to see was a message entry that started something like this, “A Coast Guard lieutenant commander...” As a result, I got a good night's sleep the night before the trip started, took my time, and made several stops each day. When I started two hours late the second day, I didn't speed to make up the time; I stopped a bit later in the afternoon and spread the delay over two days. I just did all those safe, boring things we've learned and I'm always preaching to others.

Here's what the other aircraft looked like after the mishap.



# Was the Vacation?

When we arrived 2,815 miles—give or take a couple of miles because I missed an exit while looking for coffee—later, Andi and I looked a bit the worse for wear from having spent the past nine days in a car. However, all four wheels of the car still were safely on the ground.

I felt satisfied that I had developed a plan, followed that plan, and adapted it when necessary. Unlike others on the road (I passed a significant car crash in each state), I had stayed out of trouble—well, not completely.

Remember I mentioned Pensacola? Some of you may have read about the shark attack there in which a young boy lost an arm, but surgeons later reattached it after an uncle wrestled the arm from the shark. That event happened two days after Andi and I were on the same beach for a couple days of swimming and body surfing.

I'll be the first to admit that even if I had done a risk matrix, I'm confident that "shark attack" wouldn't have been on the list, or it certainly wouldn't have been very high on the list. However, the shark incident made me ask what I would have done if Andi had hit her head and had fallen unconscious while body surfing. A lot of people were swimming, but the lifeguards were off duty. Where was the nearest phone, the nearest ranger station, the nearest hospital? I didn't have answers for these questions, and although I'm confident I would have reacted correctly in an emergency, I should have known the answers.

The point I want to hammer home is that we all need to be aware of our circumstances and have a general idea how we'll respond to any emergency. The idea of ORM isn't to eliminate risk—we can't do that; instead, it's to

manage risk. It has a place in our personal lives, as well as our professional lives. With so many morons out there competing with you for space on the planet, make sure you're watching out for yourself and your loved ones.

By now, you're probably wondering about the photos on the previous two pages. Let me explain.

Having left the beach (without a shark attack), we went to visit my parents in Ocala—about a seven-hour drive away. My travel plan got us there safely, but then came the Fourth of July. Now there's a target-rich environment for morons! Did you hear about the guy who had

field, reducing ground speed, Mr. X stated, 'I don't think he sees us.' I verbally concurred with him. Almost immediately after that statement, the aircraft made a 90-degree turn to the left, which brought it directly in line with our aircraft in a head-to-head position." Yep, the two aircraft came together at about 50 to 60 knots of closure speed.

As I said earlier, daily life is dangerous, but you can't avoid it or hide from it. Our pilot, a former NASA engineer with 43 years of flight experience without a single incident, saved us from a head-on crash. When he saw the other aircraft, he immediately calculated in

**The idea of ORM isn't to eliminate risk—we can't do that; instead, it's to manage risk.**

his face blown away while looking down the barrel of a fireworks launcher? It seems the thing just didn't come out when he expected, so he took a close look. You can figure the rest of the story.

Fireworks aren't for me. On the other hand, though, I love to fly. I've never wanted to do it in the Coast Guard, but every time I go home, I take a hop with one of my dad's friends. This time, I took along Andi, who has a huge frequent-flyer account with a commercial airlines but never had flown in a small plane. "Let's go; summer is about exploring new things!" I said to her.

We had had a nice, leisurely flight over my hometown to see how things had grown up and were coming in for a landing when the unexpected happened. So you'll know what the "unexpected" was, here's a part of my statement to the FAA: "As we continued to roll along the

his mind the worst thing that could happen and what he would do in that case (mitigating the risk). If he hadn't been alert to the first signs of danger and hadn't started addressing them, this story would have ended much differently. When the worst case did arise, he maneuvered us into the position of least danger.

The point of my story is to be aware of your circumstances, maintain control over those things you can, and be alert to those events over which you don't have direct control (like a car crossing the yellow line). Operators call it "situational awareness." Don't go through your daily lives in a happy-go-lucky daze.

Apply the concept of ORM to everything you do, and give yourself a fighting chance to stay ahead of fate. ■

*When the author wrote this article, he was XO of the U.S. Coast Guard Loran Support Unit in Wildwood, N.J.*