

ORM and Reduce

*By Larry Fosgate, 2nd Officer,
USNS Rappahannock (T-AO 204)*

During the past 30-plus years, I have been involved in hundreds of unreps, conreps, and maneuvering drills. Although I never experienced a catastrophic unrep collision, I have seen many near-mishaps and situations where ships “bumped” each other. The following offers some lessons I’ve learned.

For one thing, during all unreps the helmsman at the wheel should be the most qualified aboard (MSC ships usually have a screening process to determine their best helmsman). Another steering helmsman should be standing by, so the one steering can be relieved if he has been on watch too long, needs to make a head call, or if any other problem arises. Their rotation should be routine and frequent—29-minute cycles seem to work well on most MSC ships.

The helm-safety observer (or lee helm) should also be an instructor helmsman, qualified for unreps. He should not be a midshipman on a summer cruise. At any time during the event, that person should be

Watchstanders Near-Mishaps

able to determine the bias on the wheel, whether he is adequately controlling yaw about the course, or if there is inappropriate rudder used or held too long. The helm safety observer can also periodically engage the helmsman in a dialogue to make sure the helmsman understands his rudder orders and why he received them. The dialogue will help the safety observer determine if the helmsman is alert and concentrating on his responsibilities. He can also determine that the helmsman should be relieved, if he appears confused or sluggish in responding to rudder orders or the conversation in general.

I've detected a common thread in investigations I have seen after ships bumped each other. In every incident, the conning officer—at some point—issued rudder orders to correct a problem. These orders actually worsened problems.

The helmsman must have a feel for how the ship is handling and should quickly perceive changes in the tensioning of the unrep rigs. He is steering an ordered course and doing whatever is necessary to maintain that course.

The conning officer must determine which course to steer to maintain distance and approach angle during the unrep, but he rarely knows the actual rudder angle during any given time. A conning officer has a rudder-angle indicator and may be a good helmsman in his own right, but he must concentrate on the vessels' relative movements. He cannot let himself be distracted by concentrating on the rudder-angle indicator to know exactly how much rudder may be dragging to maintain the ship's position. If the conning officer is distracted, he could issue inappropriate, or dangerous, rudder orders. The orders also might be confusing if the helmsman knows they're inappropriate, which could add to

delays and uncertainty. More radical helm orders might follow, leading to closure of the sterns if the inappropriate order is, in fact, executed.

Conning officers, PCOs and others headed for the surface fleet should be taught that during an unrep, conrep, or other close-quarters maneuvering, helm orders should only be given after the last line is free and during the breakaway—at that point the orders govern the rate of separation. Before that, only course orders should be given to the wheel. If the helmsman cannot steer the course, he immediately should be relieved.

My experience has been with both active duty and MSC ships, aboard both delivery and receiving vessels, and what I have described can be applied to all bridge teams during unrep.

When the ships have closed to within 100 feet, I have seen the closing problem handled calmly, sometimes requiring only rudder-order clarification or course changes. At other times, though, it required relieving the helmsman, whose inability or inattention may have caused potentially dangerous closure.

Although I previously had published an article about unrep conning in which I emphasized these

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points, I continue to see conning officers acting as helmsman from the bridge wing. (*Fathom*, October-December 1997)

It doesn't work! ☹

[Mr. Fosgate has been with MSCPAC for 15 years. You can find an underway replenishment ORM presentation on our web site. Go to <http://www.safetycenter.navy.mil/orm/AfloatORM/TrainingScenarios/unrep/index.html>.—Ed.]