

Don't Be Afraid to

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Editor's note: This incident happened many years ago, but the author wanted to share his experience because the lessons learned are as important today as they were back then.

Our communications team was conducting a routine transmitter check on an island near Subic Bay, Republic of the Philippines. We'd been ferried to the transmitter site by a 36-foot, special warfare craft light, or SWCL as it was then known. These fiberglass V-hulls had enclosed cockpits forward and tarp-covered passenger areas aft; they are no longer in the Navy inventory. I wanted to get out of our cramped office for a day so I went along for familiarization purposes. I was new to the detachment as an assistant-officer-in-charge, and I was anticipating underway time with our boat crews. The day was overcast with scattered showers, but the sea-state was low and visibility unobstructed.

The comm guys soon finished their transmitter checks and it was time to return to our boat to go back to base. When we arrived at the pier, two other detachment craft were there to join us for the return trip. This was not unusual since our boat crews were required to conduct daily underway-readiness drills. We boarded our craft and all three boats got underway, heading into the bay. I felt a sense of foreboding—but kept it to myself—because it soon became obvious this would not be a simple waterborne return to base.

Once underway, the three crews began ad hoc, high-speed training “exercises” with two boats in echelon formation and the third boat acting as an aggressor. I had been told about these maneuvers shortly after reporting aboard the unit. Being naïve about such ops, I had wanted to see them first-hand.

The aggressor boat rapidly overtook us from starboard and looped around, approaching hard on the lead boat's bow. During this first pass—despite their very experienced crew—the aggressor lost control while in the lead's wake and delivered a hard, glancing blow to our trail boat in which I was riding. The collision severely damaged our craft and nearly killed one of our crew members.

This mishap shows the problem with ad-hoc exercises that lack command authorization and that weren't included in any training plan.

There also are lessons to be learned from an operational perspective. How about the briefing? You must brief all participants before conducting any exercise or ship movement. Briefings are routine for high-profile events like live-fire exercises, entering port, loading ammo, or tactical convoy

Act on Your Gut Instincts

movements. Unfortunately, low-profile events are often overlooked. But, the fact that no weapons are involved, fewer people participate, or the event seems routine does not always reduce mishap potential. Risks can be quite high during such events—particularly during an ad-hoc exercise—since participants often make false assumptions or take things for granted. Even a boiler-plate, pre-event brief can answer the “who-what-when-where-why?” questions to make sure participants all read from the same script.

Second, when you see something isn't right, do something about it! Should I perhaps have said something when we boarded our boat to return to base and my gut feeling warned me something wasn't right? Erring on the side of caution is drummed into us on the firing line where live ammo is used. However, all too frequently Sailors tend to be lax about risks to themselves and to their shipmates when they repetitively participate in various exercises and operations.

Regardless of your operational role in an event, failure to follow your instincts when you sense a deteriorating or threatening situation—or when something is obviously deviating from an accepted norm—cannot be attributed to naivete or inexperience. During our three-boat, ad hoc exercise, we had many opportunities to raise the caution flag. Listen to that small warning voice in the back of your mind when it tells you something isn't right, and respond appropriately. This is particularly important to junior officers since they must imbue this concept into those under their charge, and follow it themselves. Junior officers are frequently involved

in demanding and dangerous operations during which their inexperience has them relying on the professionalism of their junior Sailors. There's nothing wrong with this and it's a good way to learn, but if things suddenly go awry, your own intuition or gut instincts might save the day.

There's also the issue of seniority aboard small craft. Navy instructions spell out individual responsibilities of small craft crew members and passengers, including the petty officer-in-charge, who is responsible for craft operation. However, passengers also share responsibility for situational awareness and informing boat crew members of any potential threat or operational abnormality.

An alert passenger who just questions what is going on might cast enough light on a situation to spur others into action.

My collision happened several years ago, but situational awareness and following your gut instincts are timeless risk-reducers. They are important building blocks for the defense against operational mishaps. ☺

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