

Enter the Process



By LCdr. Gabe Soltero

Picture this: three carriers and 18 aircraft from three different services, all flying in close formation for the money shot. Then add foreign naval officers observing the show from the flag bridge. Oh yeah, this event was happening three weeks before the end of a six-month deployment. Can you say “ORM nightmare”?

Should I ask those famous last words, “What possibly could go wrong?”

I can see the origins of this whole event: Late last year, some commander sitting at a desk in cubicle-world must have looked at the overlapping schedules of the three aircraft carriers and wondered how to get them together for some good, old-fashioned, blue-water ops. Ten months, 36 briefs, and 2,874 slides later, the stage was set. But the exercise—the first of its kind—was missing a name. Never ones to let creativity get in the way of the pedestrian, planners chose (yawn) *Valiant Shield*. But, wait, staffers wondered, “What about a picture?” After all, it’s not every day you get a B-2 to fly low over a dozen ships, leading a formation of multiple tactical and rotary-wing aircraft from three services. Wouldn’t the boss just *love* such a picture? Wouldn’t the pilots in the formation get a huge kick out of saying, “Yep, that’s me right there”? Enter the ORM process.

You can imagine the first step in this entire ORM analysis, where you identify the hazards, must have taken quite a while. Everything from weather and sea state to broken aircraft and wayward merchants who might disrupt the painstakingly choreographed formation were identified. Then we factored in the Air Force and its, well, Air Forceness.

Seriously, though, one of the more dangerous hazards we considered was focus. Our carrier was on the way home after its air wing had spent three months patrolling the skies over Iraq and helping out the troops on the ground from Basrah to Mosul. The missions were intense at times, and we departed the Gulf after doing what we believed was a fine job. Now our mindsets were shifting to homecoming mode. True, we are professional aviators, paid to put aside our personal worries, use CRM, and do our job well. But, we’re also human, and to think we simply can forget we’ll be home in a little more than two weeks is unrealistic, if not foolish. As real as this hazard was, it was a simple one to mitigate: No fixed-wing aircraft from our strike group took part in it.

The planning stages proceeded smoothly as the ORM process continued. When all was said and done, there weren’t many differences between the photo-ex brief and the type of brief we conduct before flying on a daily basis: fallout plans, go-no go weather, altitude

deconfliction, and SAR assets. Sometimes it takes doing something out of the ordinary for one to remember we employ ORM on every mission.

When the day of the event arrived, the gods were kind, granting good weather for us to show our stuff. In a move that certainly surprised more than a few people, naval officers from a foreign country came aboard our carrier to observe the entire evolution. Some might perceive this move as yet another hazard, and they might be right. It certainly was not necessary to add any more pressure—real or perceived—to what already was a risky evolution. Again, the solution was a simple one: All the participating aircraft were from units and/or ships other than the one the foreigners were visiting. We knew we could put on an impressive show, but we also were convinced we could do so without being too flashy. ORM helped us not forget that bit of common sense.

The carriers lined up three abreast, with the cruisers and destroyers bringing up the rear. Sailors hoisted battle ensigns as their captains looked on proudly. Helicopters darted here and there like movie directors on a set, urging this carrier to increase her speed and that destroyer to come left half a degree. Soon enough, everyone was where they needed to be; it was time.

The B-2 led the flight of 17 (plus one chase plane), sweeping over the ships and perfectly casting its shadow

over the carrier at the very center of the formation. On each of its wings, a division of FA-18s, one Navy, one Marine, followed in diamond formation, with Air Force F-15s and F-16s in a second echelon behind them. It was a beautiful sight.

Aboard the various vessels, camera flashes went off as they do at the Super Bowl's opening kickoff. The jets circled and returned to their rendezvous point before making a second pass. All went smoothly, or at least it seemed so to this observer. More pictures were snapped, and the planes returned to their launching point. ORM had paid off, and the results immediately were evident: a pumped-up crew ready to begin a large exercise, an impressive show of air and sea power for our foreign visitors, and a vote of confidence for joint operations over the open ocean—not too shabby.

While we may not always have the luxury to perform an in-depth ORM analysis for all we do, we certainly can use the basic tools of the process to become aware of what might hurt us when we're not looking. That's where the two other levels of ORM, time critical and deliberate, come into play. In the end, if we all get to go home safely, we've done our job. Our responsibility as leaders is to continually instill this process in our culture; it's designed for use with special events, as well as daily activities. 🇺🇸

LCdr. Soltero flies with HS-4.