



# Scotland's Beautiful, But I Don't Want to Be a Permanent Part of It

*By Lt. Ingrid Müller*

**W**e were in the North Atlantic, flying off the coast of Scotland, in the annual British-run exercise called the Joint Maritime Course (JMC). Our two-plane, three-crew detachment was working around-the-clock ops on USW, ASUW, NGFS, you name it. Our ship successfully had prosecuted submarines, fired missiles, and coordinated air defense. The air department tracked four submarines; spotted and eliminated numerous patrol boats, and conducted a maritime interdiction operation. Our NATO counterparts were impressed with everything, except one helicopter crew.

That crew, when they got in the air, accomplished nothing. They got airborne, they dropped buoys, they streamed the MAD, they got the FLIR, ESM, and radar systems all up and purring like a kitten, and they produced nothing. Nothing! This is the crew who, one night, while working with the Brits more than 100 miles

from the ship, refused to come home until they got some kind of contact. They couldn't go home without at least a sniff of the adversary. Of course, they eventually did go home empty-handed, again. In a word, humiliating.

This was my crew, and our weak performance continued for two weeks. Everyone can understand how frustrated our crew was. We were not bad at our jobs. Heck, we actually got the highest grade for our submarine prosecution at AUTEK during pre-deployment work-ups. JMC wasn't our time to shine. We had one last flight to show off our stuff before the exercise ended. It was designed to be simple: Go out, find any of the five enemy fast patrol boats (FPBs), and fire on them with our simulated Hellfires and Penguins, our box lunches, or anything else we had.

The northern coast of Scotland is a far cry from the Gulf Stream waters off the coast of

Florida where we trained. We were flying in an environment of dense fog, chilly rain, 20 hours of daylight, and temperatures that rarely got above 50 degrees. But we figured, "To hell with the weather, we're going to find us a FPB even if it kills us." Remember that.

We got airborne, and the weather was surprisingly beautiful. We had a full bag and were going 150 knots (anyone who flies 60Bs knows this is quite a feat, so obviously we meant business). We headed toward contacts our ASTAC and sensor operator recommended and flew in low (50 feet off the deck) and fast, using all the tricks they taught us in the FRS. On the way to one of these contacts, we hit a wall of weather, a cloud layer from the water to 600 feet. We had to skip that contact. The next contact also was in the cloud layer and so were the next two contacts after that. We finally found one highly suspicious contact on radar, surrounded by weather,

except that, this time, the weather was clear from the water to 100 feet. We bought ourselves a whopping 10 feet of clearance from the goo and flew in at 90 feet. I was at the controls in the right seat, and I felt comfortable, as did the HAC and the aircrewman. We just wanted to kill an FPB.

We headed in at 150 knots, with visibility three-quarters of a mile—sweet weather for Scotland. As we got closer to the contact, the sensor operator gave me updated vectors, and the weather started to deteriorate. We agreed to slow down, to do the night and IMC checklist, and to approach the contact from our left side, so we wouldn't run into any tall masts this contact might have. As the weather got thicker, we had to descend a little more. We were so close, and we weren't going to back off this time. We inched down a few feet at a time, ever closer to our all-but-confirmed kill. Finally, we were upon the contact, and the AW and HAC positively identified

it. Of course, it wasn't a ship. My copilot calmly stated, "This is lame; it's just an island. Pretty though, has huge hills."

I responded with, "Oh yeah, I see a rock over there in front of me. Cool. Wait, what did you just say? Something about huge hills?"

Simultaneously, we grabbed the controls, placed the collective firmly in our armpits, and banked hard right. My HAC had a bit of vertigo since she was just looking at the beautiful hills and had to suddenly swap her scan from the side to the instruments, because we were, what else? In the goo.

We stayed IMC until we broke out at 1,800 feet. I was glued to the instruments. To make matters worse, we had to break comms with our controller to descend below the clouds. We were flying around uncontrolled in IMC, but at least there was nobody else in the area. Could that have been because nobody else was dumb, er, brave enough to pull a stunt like that?

We finally broke out and reestablished comms with mother. As we turned inbound toward the ship, our junior crewman declared how much "fun" that was. My copilot and I looked at each other, deciding simultaneously our crewman should be counseled as soon as possible. Then we told him that almost flying into mountains is hell on the nervous system, not fun.

We didn't mind being the crew that got nothing, just as long as we never, never did that again. As a crew, we had decided to go in and identify this guy, but we all knew why we wanted to do it. One of us should have mentally stepped outside and realized we were trying to identify the target for the wrong reasons. Next time, even if we are not together as a team, any one of us will be the voice of reason. That will be all it takes to make sure the next crew doesn't go down in flames because of a little pride. 

Lt. Muller flies with HSL-48.