

To Launch or Not to

Imagine this: You're in the Baltic Sea in March, participating in Strong Resolve 2002, a NATO exercise. The water temp is 41 degrees Fahrenheit, and the air temp is about 50. Two days ago, your detachment had installed a new main-rotor blade. Because of ship's schedule, weather, and a finicky blade, you have not finished the functional-check flight. The main-rotor blade track and balance is coming along nicely, but you probably will need a couple more adjustments.

As you walk into combat to see how the day is progressing, you hear the horrible phrase, "Man overboard." You quickly make mental calculations about survival time and you get more details. Thirty miles away, a British small-boat has turned over during a passenger transfer. One man is in the water, and NATO ships are heading to the area to assist.

ORM Corner

Please send your questions, comments or recommendations to Ted Wirginis: Code 11, Naval Safety Center, 375 A St., Norfolk, VA 23511-4399. (757) 444-3520, ext. 7271 (DSN-564). E-mail: twirginis@safetycenter.navy.mil

Photo by Matthew J. Thomas



Launch

By LCdr. R. Todd Lewis

You start asking the question that everyone in combat is asking by merely looking at you: “Can you fly?” Let’s see. Although the helicopter feels very smooth, the FCF is incomplete, with vibration-analysis-test-set (VATS) gear still installed. The weather is about 400 and 2, with light rain. Sunset is in two hours. You learn another helicopter is airborne and on scene. Painfully, you say “no” to launching. Just in case, though, you tell the detachment chief to go ahead and remove the VATS gear and prep the helicopter for launch.

Fast forward five minutes. Instead of one sailor in the water, now there are five. The helicopter and other ships on scene can’t find all five. The on-scene commander frantically is asking for a ship with a doctor. Medical evacuations are very likely. Ownship is closing datum at 28 knots.

Several eyes are on you, looking for a launch decision. Weather is not great, sunset is not that far away, the pressure to fly a SAR-medevac is great, and the FCF still is incomplete.

What would you do? You are an OinC, and you don’t have time to consult with your skipper. The decision needs to be made now. The helicopter technically is not legal to fly on anything but an FCF. Five allied-nation sailors are floating in the 41-degree water, and you have an outstanding SAR asset.

So, what did I do? My MO and I found a quiet corner, outlined all the reasons we should not do it, talked about how we would try to control the hazards, and listed reasons why we should do it. Ultimately, after our ORM session, we decided launching was justified. The det chief and both rescue swimmers agreed. We

suiting up and told the captain we were standing by to pull the helicopter out of the hangar for launch.

In the end, we were not needed. A second helicopter got airborne to assist, and another small-boat was launched. The helicopter picked up two sailors, the small-boat three. One sailor was pulled out of the water unconscious. Thankfully, whatever caused the first boat to capsize didn’t affect the rescue boat.

Is this a true story or a training scenario? Unfortunately, it is a true story. Two NATO sailors lost their lives that day. They were in the water for about 30 minutes. The next time you complain about having to put on your anti-exposure suit or wonder if you should wear it on a borderline day, think about the family members of those two sailors. They probably would give everything to roll back time and put their loved ones in an appropriate suit.

I took two things from this fateful day in March. First, ORM is a key tool when used correctly. It cannot be reverse engineered. One cannot say, “OK, we are going to launch. Let’s do an ORM to make it safe.” That is wrong. ORM is, of course, a process to determine if you should do something before you try it or decide to try it. Completing ORM does not guarantee safety, either. It helps you make a decision on whether something can be completed with minimal risk.

Second, we are issued aviation-life-support-system equipment for a reason. Comfort is not always one of the reasons. Being a little uncomfortable for a few hours is much better than being dead for the rest of your life. 🦅

LCdr. Lewis flies with HSL-42.