

# My First Day As SDO

By Ltjg. Tim Johnston

*To the editor: Here's an article from the other side, from those who dutifully activate the pre-mishap plan (PMP) to report to the chain of command incidents that result in death or injury. Learning points are included for all squadron duty officers.—Ltjg. Johnston*

Every JO in a squadron, regardless of his or her experience level, is required to stand squadron-duty officer (SDO). The SDO is the acting representative of the squadron commanding officer, and the job carries a large amount of responsibility. The daily tasks include making coffee, answering the phone, reading the latest issue of *Approach*, and, when leadership is present, occasionally being “cannon fodder” in support of JOPA.



Photo by PH2 Norman T. Kemper



I had one day of under-instruction (UI) training where I learned the basics of the duty (the precise technique for coffee-making) and got a general overview of the situations I might have to handle. I also spent an hour flipping through the squadron pre-mishap binder—just in case. I noticed we used a community-wide plan from our type wing. The plan was modified by each squadron to include appropriate phone numbers and message PLADs for our squadron’s operational chain of command.

I had been with the squadron just over a month when I stood my first SDO—on a Saturday. Our squadron was ferrying aircraft from the West to the East Coast for a two-week CQ detachment. The CO, XO, lieutenant commanders, and a few senior lieutenants would fly to Chambers Field at NS Norfolk, while I manned the desk, awaiting their “safe on deck” phone call from the other side of the country. Once everyone had briefed and was airborne, I had a chance to catch up on watching college football.

The day had been uneventful for the most part. Based on the flight schedule, the aircrew would be on deck about 1800, my time. I expected to leave the squadron no later than 1900. About 1730, I had the ASDO briefed, prepped and ready to relieve me, as soon as I received word everyone was safe on deck. I had been at the squadron all day and was anxious to go home. I looked at the clock; 1800 came and went without any word. At 1900, I still hadn’t been called. “What was taking them so long?” I wondered. I started to get an uneasy feeling; there had been no word of a delay.

Just after 1900, I received a phone call from the XO. It was a relief to hear from someone. I expected to hear,

“We’re safe on deck at Norfolk; we logged a 6.0.”

However, what I got from the XO was, “I’m at Oceana; something has happened.”

My initial thought was, “What the heck is he doing in Oceana?”

Then I heard, “I needed to divert because something happened to 501. I don’t have any more details.”

After a brief pause, he added, “You need to put your pre-mishap plan into effect.” I remember my mind going completely blank.

“Tim, are you still there?” he asked.

That question yanked me back into reality. He told me to immediately contact Chambers Field base ops for more details.

Base ops did not have any specific information about the mishap aircraft. All I had to work with was from the XO. I could not think of the first thing I needed to do to put the pre-mishap plan into effect. I felt like I had 10,000 tasks that demanded my immediate attention. I was experiencing “crisis mode.” After relaxing a few seconds, I pulled myself together and focused on the basics. One thing was certain: I needed help. I only had a few moments before the fecal matter hit the proverbial fan, so I recruited assistance. I didn’t know what had happened to my squadronmates in the mishap, but at least I would have help dealing with the situation.

I began to recall all the officers to the ready room. It then dawned on me: This was a Saturday night before the airlifts to the boat the next day, and I might not contact some of them. I asked nicely the first time for each of them to get into their flight suits and to get to the squadron as quickly as possible. After the inevitable

response, “Are you &%\*# serious?” I reemphasized my previous statement with some colorful language and a marked increase in decibel level.

During this recall process, I received a phone call from base ops at the mishap site, letting me know two things: The aircraft was destroyed, and everyone was alive and well. This info was great news. Only 30 minutes had passed since my initial notification by the XO, but it seemed like an eternity.

Executing the pre-mishap plan during an actual crisis proved to be more difficult than I had expected. While I initially flipped through numerous tabs of the

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binder, directed multiple tasks, and informed multiple commands of our situation, I remembered thinking, “No sweat. I can do this.”

The squadron safety officer had put the ready room through its paces with a Class-A-mishap drill—involving fatalities—just a month earlier. However, once I found myself running an actual Class-A-mishap-notification plan, I discovered how many unpredictable factors can pop up.

The time constraints on the OPREP messages (the five-minute phone call and 20-minute message) are difficult to achieve because information often is incomplete, and time seems to slip through your fingers as a one-man show. In addition, the 20-minute message has to be done on Turboprep messaging software, which, of course, few of our officers knew how to use. I was thankful our PNI arrived to type and transmit the message. Our safety officer had briefed the ready room five days earlier, at a pre-mishap-plan review, that preformatted operations report (OPREP) and mishap-data-report (MDR) messages were on computer disks in the back of the pre-mishap-plan binder.

I must have fallen asleep on the JOPA couch at the back of the ready room during that death-by-PowerPoint session. So, unfortunately, many people who should have received the Navy Blue OPREP did not. My “crisis mode” also wreaked havoc with the MDR. All three of our aviation-safety-officer-school graduates were at the mishap site and involved at that end.

What I had were six JOs looking at each other, saying, “M. D. what?” Again, JOPA couch, death-by-PowerPoint. This report needed to be transmitted within four hours, but it asked for many details involving the mishap-aircraft environment. We did not have the information or the experience to get it completed within the time limit. We learned later that transmitting an incomplete MDR is better than getting the message out late. A couple of phone numbers in the operational chain of command were not readily available and caused some delay of information. Squadron members on location with cell phones assisted.

After two hours of running the mishap plan, I was spent. It already had been a long day, and the stress had worn me down. A couple of times at the end of the night, someone called, I talked to them, answered a quick question, then hung up. When I answered the phone, I knew exactly whom I was talking to, but, upon hanging up, I had forgotten who it was. Fortunately, the events were winding down when my memory went away; otherwise, I would have passed all the phone responsibilities to another officer.

The pre-mishap plan took about three-and-a-half hours to execute. With our senior leadership on the East Coast (including our safety officer and all our ASO graduates), each officer with me had to pull a lot more weight.

We had a basic familiarity with the pre-mishap binder, but, because we were junior, most of us had not run a scenario; some had not been present during the drill several weeks before. Two of the six officers had less than two months in the squadron (including myself). If the other five officers had not shown up as quickly, I doubt I could have handled the situation.

**Take time to carefully review the pre-mishap binder at your command, including the MDR.** Don’t go it alone; get your squadronmates to help you. **Learn how to prepare a message.** Understand that in a real-life situation, it is more important to make the deadline than to delay the message, waiting for all the information. Amendments and updates can and will be sent later. Don’t forget to record whom you are talking to and get their number for later reference; our PMP contains chronological-log sheets for this purpose. No one successfully can predict a mishap, but all of us can prepare for the worst. 

Ltjg. Johnston flies with VAQ-141.

*JOPA is the junior officers protection agency—the O-3s (lieutenants) and below in a squadron who band together for mutual protection.—Ed.*