

## The Drill —We Lost an Aircraft

By Lt. Chris McKone

**“I have just learned that we lost an aircraft.”**

This was the statement presented to the members of Patrol Squadron Sixteen by the new commanding officer during quarters. The squadron duty officer just had rushed into the room after receiving a phone call saying that a squadron P-3 had ditched on a training mission.

Courage and proper training are essential to successfully navigate through a crisis. Although courage is the more illustrious of the two traits, it is difficult to instill and even harder to evaluate. We all hope to possess courage, but we never can be sure we have it until the need arises. Training is the one variable in a crisis situation that can be controlled, and, therefore, its value never can be overestimated. Courage may be the soul of the American military, but training is its backbone.

The VP-16 personnel in the room that morning did not know it yet, but the safety department had devised a way to test each and every one of them with regard to courage and training.

My crew, combat aircrew (CAC) five, was scheduled for an antisubmarine-warfare (ASW) training flight, beginning early in the morning. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary as we prepared to fly. The preflight had gone a little long because of minor equipment problems, but we still tried to meet our briefed takeoff time. With this in mind, I was a little annoyed to see our aviation-safety officer making his way up the ladder as we prepared to strap in. Anything he had to pass surely could wait until we returned.

Unfortunately, he said our flight was canceled, and we were part of an elaborate drill that would benefit the crew and the squadron far more than the flight could have. We were told to man our respective positions, make an “off deck” call to base, and then egress the aircraft. After sliding down the flaps in our survival vests and helmets, we were transported to the base water-survival facility, which, to our dismay, recently had reopened after a complete renovation. We were not to have any contact with our squadronmates in an effort to ensure the illusion of our airborne status. Our new skipper’s first quarters was kicking off.

Once at the pool complex, we were brought up-to-speed on the intent of the exercise. My

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11-man crew and I were to conduct a drill on water survival, while the squadron ran a commandwide mishap drill. To best simulate an actual ditch, we were asked to perform all the tasks involved in the water-survival course. These tasks included dunker egress (my personal favorite), full flight-gear swim, raft boarding, and a helo-hoist recovery.

Our water-survival drill was conducted with no classroom briefs, so my crew would be evaluated in a real-time scenario. We were armed only with the knowledge we had retained from previous refresher training. The scenario was designed to be as realistic as possible, including simulated injuries and the challenges those injuries presented during the egress, survival and rescue phases. My crew was evaluated on our ability to egress from a downed aircraft and to use the survival gear provided within the raft. Our ability to perform as a team also was evaluated. The focus of this portion of the exercise was to use my crew as a cross section of the squadron to determine if an aircrew could perform their duties in the event of an actual ditch. We did extremely well, and the exercise exceeded its intended goal.

While we enjoyed our unexpected refresher on water survival, the rest of the squadron had its hands full, dealing with the aftermath of such a catastrophic event. The best way to investigate an organization's preparedness is to develop a practical examination that is unexpected and realistic. Unknown to our crew, the skipper had told the squadron our aircraft had ditched, and survivor status was unknown. This information was not preceded by the well known, "This is a drill," but merely laid out to the squadron as fact.

After allowing such a thought to sink in for a minute, the skipper told those at quarters it was a drill, and the squadron would be evaluated on its ability to employ the mishap plan. In those few seconds, the CO had accomplished something extremely difficult. He had managed to test the courage of those within his command. Each individual in the room, for a brief moment, was forced to come to terms with the fact they



had a job to do under the worst possible circumstances. Now that their courage had been tested from within, it was time to move on to the more tangible phase of the exercise, to test our squadron training.

The mishap plan was set in motion, and virtually every member of the squadron had a part



- Uncertainty of exact inventory of classified material aboard.
- Security detail was unsure whom they could allow near the simulated wreckage site.
- Emergency-reclamation-team members were unsure of some of the avionics gear and its location aboard the aircraft.

to play in implementing it. The major players involved were the duty office, the aircraft-mishap board (AMB), the emergency-reclamation team (ERT), maintenance control, the security detail, and the casualty-assistance-calls officers (CACO). Each of these teams had specific duties to be performed in a timely manner to make sure the proper information could be gathered, retained and disseminated. The duty office became a hub of action.

Within an hour, the mishap plan had been ripped apart as folks flooded the duty office to grab “their tab” of the plan. One of the valuable lessons learned during the course of the drill was to make the mishap plan more accessible by creating separate binders for each critical team. Smaller, individualized binders would have alleviated the extra burden on an already task-saturated duty office. The duty officer also learned to recruit extra personnel early and often. By grabbing additional officers and petty officers to act as runners, phone talkers, and recorders, the load further was reduced and information flow to the skipper improved.

Other areas of concern identified by each team leader during the afternoon all-hands debrief included:

- An outdated mishap kit (Polaroid versus digital camera).
- Uncertainty of an accurate manifest for the flight, because of pen and ink changes to the flight schedule.

- Maintenance control was slow to lock down NAL-COMIS and to obtain an accurate “All tools accounted for” call.

- Aircrew page 2s were in need of update.
- No accurate listing of command CACOs existed.

We used this drill to improve our mishap plan. We now have a new mishap kit with digital cameras, GPS receivers, and hand-held radios. Our ERT has held training on the various P-3 avionics suites. Improved procedures for making sure accurate personnel manifests and crypto and ordnance load-outs now are in place. Admin conducted a thorough review of all page 2 data, and a listing of all CACOs has been placed in the SDO’s Pre-Mishap Plan binder. I would guess that our lessons learned could be applied to many other aviation squadrons.

A foundation of our squadron always has been, “To stop striving forward is to atrophy...so press on to be the best!” Not challenging yourself or those you lead to improve certainly will hinder success when the time to perform arrives. We never again want to hear the skipper utter these words, “We have just lost an aircraft.” But, if we do, Patrol Squadron Sixteen now is better equipped to handle such a catastrophe with courage and proper training. 🦅

Lt. McKone flies with VP-16.