

Out Futenma Fun Flight

by Capt. J.D. Osborne

The 2nd MAW recently revised its Operational Risk Management Order. This order was written as a model to be adapted by the rest of the Marine Corps. Many Marine aviators are still undecided about whether it applies. Some view it as a better way to conduct business and save irreplaceable assets. Others think it will be another Marine Corps order written for the express purpose of impaling promising careers. If ORM had been around a few years ago, two motivated senior aviators in my squadron would never have been allowed to launch.

“Lastly, don’t let your HAC kill you, and believe me, he will try.” Thus, ended the instrument ground school part of flight school at NAS Whiting Field. Although I was a young, hard-charging Marine, confronting my own mortality was sobering. The realities of naval aviation were only a passing thought as I was still a few months away from receiving my wings of gold. I finished flight school and soon found myself in Okinawa in the advanced party of a CH-46E squadron starting a UDP. The thought of another Marine “trying” to kill me never entered my mind until I flew a cross-country from MCAS Futenma to Camp Humphries AAF in the Republic of Korea.

Following the turnover of aircraft between squadrons, I immediately completed three day-VFR flights, the first since being designated as an H-46 pilot. During the afternoon of my third flight, the next day’s schedule came out. I would be the copilot of the second aircraft in a section flying to Korea.

Flight planning was routine: “Hey, new guy, get the other copilot, and find and prepare the maps for tomorrow’s flight.”

The other copilot and I went to work ensuring all of the maps, navigation and fuel calculations were correct. The first leg would take us from “Fun-Tenma” to Kanoya, approximately 400 miles over open ocean. The second leg would take us to Pusan, and a final short leg would complete the cross-country to Camp Humphries. The entire trip was 875 miles—seven and a half hours of flight time.

Once we computed the brief time, fuel stops and inevitable delays, we figured we would be pushing the limits of our crew day. We finished all of the preparations by 2230. The brief was scheduled at 0500 the next morning. It was a good thing the section leader didn’t wait till the last minute to give us our instructions.

The brief began on time. The XO told us we had to reach our destination. The squadron was part of a Special Purpose MAGTF participating in a joint exercise.

“We are the new guys on the block,” he said. “I want to make a good first impression and let MAG Thirty-Six know they can count on us. We have to get there first.” Then we covered all of the normal things, including a check of the weather and the fuel configuration. We did not have a “Bullfrog” (an H-46 with extended range). To complete our first leg, we would have to carry two internal tanks.

A final check of weather revealed a stationary front was sitting over the southern tip of Japan, running north all the way up the Korean peninsula into China. Each of our designated landing areas were calling 500-foot ceilings and one mile visibility. This report made me a little apprehensive, because this would be the first time I would fly over an open ocean. The only time I had flown over water was when I completed my initial CQs aboard the IX-514 in Pensacola Bay.

After the brief, we went below to sign for the aircraft. The aircraft discrepancy book had a pink slip on a broken TACAN. Well, the CH-46E only has one navigational aid, and I was about to fly 400 miles over open ocean with only a compass. I asked my HAC, "Shouldn't this be a downing gripe?"

Immediately, the AMO piped up with a smirk and a nervous twitch of his hand, "You're Dash Two in a section. You don't need a TACAN. Quit being a girlie!"

I answered, "What if we get separated?"

"Ah-h, keep your eyes open and your mouth shut." Of course, these responses drew a loud roar of approval from his subordinates and a cackle from him.

I walked out of maintenance, shaking my head muttering, "Only one hundred and seventy-eight and a wakeup."

My little adventure to Korea was looking bad and not getting any better. While I was preflighting the inside of the aircraft, I heard the HAC walking on the top. Suddenly, I heard the unmistakable metallic pings of coins hitting aluminum. It sounded like someone just emptied their piggy bank in the engine compartment. I stuck my head out of the door only to see the clamshells open and the HAC bent over peering down the vert shaft holding a handful of change.

I asked, "Do you think we should get QA to doublecheck that compartment?"

"No," he replied, "I have a good idea where I dropped them." With that comment, I strapped in, realizing where mishap statistics originate.

Our section of aircraft took off at 0700 and headed north. The weather began to

deteriorate. Sure enough, by the time we reached Kanoya, the weather was as forecast. Finding the field was a little tricky but I kept my eyes open and mouth shut.

We shut down upon landing and made our way into base ops to get a better picture of the weather. The next leg would take us from Kanoya to Pusan, which was only about 220 miles. To save money, we filled only one of the two internals, giving us three hours of fuel. We

A final check of weather revealed a stationary front was sitting over the southern tip of Japan, running north all the way up the Korean peninsula into China.

launched an hour later and cautiously proceeded north at 80 knots. Eventually, we made it to the Korean Strait and the farther we went, the worse the weather got.

At one point we inadvertently went IMC at 150 feet. I had the controls and tightened up the formation. So, there I was at 100 feet, 40 knots, my only visual reference the red strobe light on the aft vert shaft and the white peanut light on the tail. The only reason I did not get vertigo was because the HAC continually repeated, "You're level, one hundred feet, forty knots."

My mind wandered back to my IFR class in flight school. How I wished I was back that day. No, I wished I was on Okinawa. No, I wished I had a TACAN. No, I wished I had told the AMO to stick it!

Just about the time we were debating to call "popeye," we broke out of the goo. We were bearing down on an oil tanker about a quarter mile ahead. The flight immediately broke left to avoid the ship, and I saw a crewman at eye level waving at us. Again my mind raced back to Whiting Field. By this time, we had been flying more than two hours, and we still had another 30 minutes to go. We had burned a lot more gas than planned because of

our slower speed. I had no idea how much farther we had to go.

We eventually made it to the peninsula and began to orbit a mile offshore. We were down to 300 pounds and ready to put the aircraft on the ground. Why were we orbiting? The lead called, "Do you guys know where the airport is? ... I have the TACAN tuned, but the field isn't there." I felt like saying, "You know, if I had nerve and some more gas I could help, but right now, I am preoccupied, looking for a place to land in the city."

Apparently, Pusan has two TACANs, one on the east coast; the other is at the field 15 miles away. Luckily, I saw a 747 on final approach. We took the lead for the first time that day and followed the heavy aircraft into Chime Airport. We shut down with just under 200 pounds a side, NATOPS minimum.

I was glad to be on the ground and thought we were done for the day. The two HACs went into base ops to get fuel and check the weather. The other copilot and I began comparing notes and concluded we had to find a place to stay in Pusan. No way would we push our luck.

Just then, a Blackhawk taxied up and shut down right next to us. Our HACs walked out and said, "OK, the trucks are on the way." My anxiety was building, as I could not believe we were going to continue. As the junior aviator, I didn't think it was my place to confront the senior aviators. But the H-60 pilots walked by, and a conversation ensued. They had flown down from Seoul and said they tried to fly VFR until they missed a wire by a couple hundred feet. Then they had immediately climbed through the goo, contacted center and flew IFR the rest of the way. They concluded, "Korea is a dangerous place. The combination of hills, power lines and bad weather will kill you. You won't catch us doing that today."

To paraphrase what those Army guys said: "If you try to fly VFR, you are stupid." But my senior aviators apparently had a case of "get-deployed-itis." The section leader turned around and said, "Let's go. It's getting late."

My mind went into overdrive. What if we go IFR? Where do we go? How will we navigate? What about crew day? What about the weather? What about the wires? This guy is trying to kill us. I said, "What are you trying to do, kill me?"

Common sense shocked them into reality. We talked to the H-60 pilots and got a place to stay on a small Army base in Pusan. That night I wondered if these guys had forgotten everything they had learned in flight school. I then wondered if the next day would be easier. If ORM had been around six years ago, despite the "seasoned judgment" of the senior aviators, there is absolutely no way this flight would have been allowed to leave Futenma.

According to the risk-assessment worksheets incorporated into the ORM Order, the following factor would have characterized this flight as a high-risk mission: Aircraft Status: Partial Mission Capable.

These factors would have characterized this flight as a medium-risk mission. Flight duration: More than 4 hours. Instrument meteorological conditions: Weather less than 500 and 1. Crew day: Greater than 10 hours.

These factors taken one at a time are easily handled. However, as a group, they can be overwhelming. What kind of control measures could have been instituted to negate these risks? I can think of many. The easiest would have been to wait an extra day in Okinawa before departing. If that would have been done, I am sure the TACAN would have been fixed, and the weather would have improved. The next time you are in a position to push the comfort zone a little, consider just how much of the zone already has been pushed. 🦅

Capt. Osborne is the NATOPS Officer for 4th MAW.