



ORM Corner is a bi-monthly department.

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Mother Nature Tracks Us Down

by Lt. Steven Nassau

It was a dark and stormy night, really. I was nearing the end of my FRS experience at HS-1 and looking forward to getting into the fleet. We briefed at 1800 for a 2000 go. My instructor for the evening was known for his

extensive (read “long”) and thorough briefs. The weather was typical of a late-summer, Florida night: hot and muggy with isolated thunderstorms rolling in from the west. We talked a little bit about the weather, but because it was a standard forecast, we didn’t think much about it. I was excited, because I had been cancelled twice earlier in the week.

About half an hour before we were to catch our hot pump and crew swap, an intense storm cell dumped water on the field. We joked about how wild the cells were, but we didn’t consider any new risks.

Our Seahawk came in on time and we took off. We immediately headed out to the warning area to get in some SAR practice prior to working the pattern at NAS Mayport. About halfway out to

the area, it started raining, and I began to suspect that the evening was not going to go as smoothly as I had thought. The winds started to gust, and our Doppler radar indicated sustained, 25-knot winds.

We were undaunted, reasoning that we were probably only catching up with the backside of the line. Once we got to the area, we figured, the storms would continue to roll eastward. The seas were heavy, and the Doppler was having a tough time estimating the ground speed. Our first automatic approach went OK (except for the wind, the rain, the seas, and Doppler), and that somehow bolstered our confidence. During our second approach, however, the wind and the rain had picked up. I continued, reasoning that the SH-60F was an all-weather aircraft, and this would be valuable training I could use in the fabled fleet. I also noticed, for the first time, no one else was saying anything. I fought the aircraft all the way to the hover, trying to keep the approach within parameters. I began to suspect, toward the bottom, that I was in way over my head. I said nothing, reiterating to myself that I “needed” the X to keep progressing and that this was “great” training.

I noticed the rain was pouring down, and for the first time, the instructor said something about the water and the potential for a flameout. Sure enough, we got into a coupled hover, and suddenly I found myself staring at a master-caution light. With my heart deciding to share room in my head with my overtaxed brain, I sneaked a quick look at the master-warning panel before practically pulling the collective out of the floorboards. My brain finally registered that it was a radalt failure—not as serious, but not minor either, given the conditions.



The rest of the crew and I began to calm down. I realized that my training had kept the helo flying (it certainly wasn't a conscious effort on my part). The instructor congratulated me on how well I handled the emergency and explained that the radalt must have just locked on to the rain.

I'd like to say that, like sane people, we headed home, but we didn't. We decided to try our luck a little farther south. We raced into some clear air and began to shoot approaches. Sure enough, it took Mother Nature about 10 minutes to find us, and then we were right back in the soup. This time, however, a voice of reason came from the back, explaining that no further training could be reasonably squeezed out of the evening. The instructor concurred, and we scooted for home.

In the surprisingly short debrief, we talked about the flight solely in terms of the training that we did or did not accomplish and then headed home. Later, I mentally reviewed the flight, realizing the truth of the adage that there are two types of aviators, those who have been scared in an aircraft and those who will be. I had just joined the former.

I thought more and more about the flight in terms of ORM. *Identify the hazards.* Check—we talked about the weather in the brief. *Assess the risks.*

Oops, the model starts to break down. The repetition of the forecast lulled us into a belief that isolated meant away from wherever we were flying. *Make risk decisions.* Nope. Training flights are about as far away from “operational necessity” as you can get. We didn't implement and supervise controls at all. We didn't discuss abort criteria, and even the fabled sanity check failed to bring us back quickly enough.

An unbroken chain of events leads to every mishap. I don't know what link was missing that night, but we weren't far from completing the chain. When I read *Approach* and see all of the articles that start with “It was a dark and stormy night,” I wonder how many of them could have been avoided by applying ORM and deciding that the “great training” isn't worth the risks. 🇺🇸

Lt. Nassau flies with HS-3



Photo-composite by Allan Amen