

# ORM *Corner*

## ORM on the Fly

By Lt. Kevin Snode

### ORM Corner

Please send your questions, comments or recommendations to:

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**A**s the squadron aviation-safety officer, I'm often asked how we can tell if this ORM stuff really works. If ORM is designed to stop something from happening, how do you know if it is ORM that stopped it, or if it just wasn't going to happen anyway?



I don't know if I have the answers to satisfy those people. I usually talk about declining mishap rates, better situational awareness, and decreased numbers of skill-based errors. My favorite answer is, "You'll know it works when the person it saves is you," and then I tell this story.

We were in the middle of our E-6B community's be-all, end-all exercise, and our 14 crew members were fatigued. After two straight days of minimum crew rest, followed by 11- and 13-hour flights, we were ready for a good, long, uninterrupted sleep. Everything pointed toward getting our needed sleep as we walked from the plane that afternoon. But, at 0300 the next morning, we got the call. Still in a fog after being awakened from a sound sleep, we suddenly were in the air.

The first hour of the flight had light-to-moderate icing and turbulence, and everyone unsuccessfully tried to knock the cobwebs out of their heads with an emergency run on coffee. Then, the pilots got the next bit of good news: We had to air refuel with two KC-135s; the other crew we replaced couldn't do it.

Our track, which was just south of Wilmington, had weather only slightly better than the weather en route; part of the track was VMC, and the rest was IMC. The rendezvous was uneventful, despite the weather, and our AC requested the tanker to turn its anti-collision lights on so we could see them. We went IMC almost immediately after contact with the tanker. We then ran into unexpected turbulence, which caused the 2P to fall off the boom after only 6,000 pounds of fuel transfer. Five people were needed to regain sight of the tanker; they had turned off their beacon again. I guess the reflection off those

pesky clouds was worse than the thought of hitting another plane.

The AC got the tanker crew to turn on their lights, and, as we joined up, their boom operator asked to turn off the tanker's auto-pilot to rebase their currency. We said we would consider it. Once in contact to get the rest of our onload, the same problems re-surfaced: IMC, turbulence, falling off the boom after 7,000 pounds of fuel.

As we went back for the rest of our 40,000-pound onload, I noticed something from my observer seat. The navigator was asleep, the flight engineer was doing touch-and-goes at his panel, and the pilots were task-saturated for the routine nature of what we were doing. It took only a second to finish this scenario in my head, and I didn't like the ending.

On the next rendezvous, the chain of events looked familiar, except I saw the lead tanker, one mile to our left, disappear into a bank of clouds just before contact. That was all it took. I told the AC to knock it off, drop to the bottom of the block, and we told the tanker, "Thank you very much"—before calling it a day.

Later in the flight, sitting on the flight deck, we joked about how tired everyone was, and the 2P laughingly said he couldn't even remember the first contact. We spent the next hour talking about on-the-fly ORM and how the requirements for the exercise never should become more important than our safety.

To those who ask whether ORM works and actually prevents the loss of airplanes and aircrew, I may not have all the statistics, or the right graphs to show, but if you had been there on the flight deck that night, you would have no doubts. 

Lt. Snode flies with VQ-4.