

A 358-Degree Turn With

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After the recent spate of collisions and the ensuing investigations, news photos of damaged ships, and discussions of accountability, I'm reminded of an incident that shows just how easily ships can find themselves in extremis.

I was a brand new ensign aboard a destroyer headed to a WestPac. Just as my sea-duty counter was approaching one month, the Schedule of Events called for a daytime unrep. My assignment was helm safety officer (or "helm dum-dum," as the JOs affectionately called it). I was told to stand by the voice tube and parrot commands between the conning officer and the helm or lee helm. The ship was on course 270; the sky was clear, the seas calm.

Another ensign (whose name was George) was conning the ship—it was his turn to drive—and the CO was standing in his back pocket just to be sure. The ship had settled alongside the oiler, our starboard side to their port, hoses connected, and pumping fuel—a routine unrep with no problems anticipated—that is, until the following command came through the voice tube, "Come left to two-seven-one."

I quickly responded, "Orders to the helm? Come left to two-seven-one?"

At this point, the helmsman put on a little left rudder, only knowing he was told to come left somewhere. "George, we can only come right to two-seven-one. You can come left to two-six-nine," I said into the tube, not wanting to embarrass a shipmate. I'm not sure if conning instructions from the helm-safety officer have any legal standing according to Navy regs, but I told the helmsman not to go any farther left and to maintain his present course. The helmsman's initial left rudder had us opening the distance from the oiler.

The conning officer then ordered, "Come left to two-seven-two."

The situation had gotten worse. I was pretty sure my mental gyrocompass was correct, but it wouldn't

have been the first time I had called something wrong.

"We cannot come left to two-seven-two; we were on course two-seven-zero. We can come right to two-seven-two," I added more forcefully into the voice tube. You could see the frustration mounting on the bridge wing. Hands were flying, and heads were turning in my direction, over a definite failure to communicate. The conning officer couldn't make me follow his orders, and I couldn't make him understand what was wrong. Meanwhile, the telephone-and-distance-line handlers were starting to see some numbers they hadn't seen in a while. What the heck are those guys on the bridge doing?

At this point, our normally reserved CO jumped through the bridge-wing door and screamed, "Left, left, come left!"

Uh-oh, gut check time. This could be a very short SWO career.

"Captain, we cannot come left to those courses without making a three-hundred-fifty-eight-degree turn," I said.

About that time, the conning officer realized he needed a

an Oiler to Starboard

nine iron to reach the oiler, and he gave a reasonable course correction to the right. I let the helmsman loose, and the ship got back to normal. That had been fun, I thought. I was secured from the detail and was out of there.

A full five minutes elapsed before the IMC blared, “Ensign Brown, bridge.” I had that old sinking feeling as I left my stateroom. I popped my head on the bridge, and the CO called me over to his chair.

“Mike, what happened up here today?” he asked in his quiet voice.

“Captain, we were on course two-seven-zero, we could not come left to two-seven-two.” I used my hands to explain, aviator style. “I did not let the helmsman follow the order and tried to resolve the situation as best I could,” I responded.

The captain thought about it for a second, nodded his head, and realized the gravity of the situation that

had transpired on his ship. “You did the right thing. Good job, thanks,” the captain said and dismissed me.

I am not telling this story to pat myself on the back, just to show how things can go wrong when least expected. One simple mistake and the consequences can be devastating. Fortunately, the error was to port. If the conning officer had made a directional error to starboard, after the helmsman’s initial movement to the right, the ship could have been sucked into the oiler more quickly than you could think about it.

All the SWO armchair quarterbacks would have shaken their heads and asked themselves, “How could this happen?” Of course, there would be the hundred obligatory articles and explanations about the Venturi effect.

These accidents continue to happen in today’s modern Navy. What is the solution? Training, ORM, teamwork, vigilance, lessons learned, and a healthy dose of common sense. I don’t believe in luck, but every experienced Sailor can look back at a particular situation in their careers, shake their heads, and say, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” ☺