

Hindsight Shows Importance of Risk Management

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It was a blustery spring morning in 1995, and I was a young division officer aboard a forward-deployed frigate underway off southern Japan. My Yokosuka-based ship was conducting joint exercises with Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) ships from Sasebo. One exercise involved our frigate, a JMSDF destroyer, and a maritime pre-positioning ship (MPS) that was a converted car-carrier.

I had been designated a visit, board, search, and seizure (VBSS) officer because all our experienced boarding officers had detached after returning from a previous exercise. I thus “moved up” from assistant boarding officer to boarding officer. Although apprehensive about directing Japanese sailors through this exercise—I had only one Arabian Gulf deployment as an assistant boarding officer—I wanted to be a good division officer, so I seized the reins and forged ahead.

This VBSS exercise ran the gamut from queries to boarding, and only 18 Japanese sailors and I participated. The queries and the pre-brief went well. As we steamed along, the MPS’ master informed us he would slow to only about 10 knots, because he didn’t want carbon to build in his massive diesel engines. He also told us it would require some time to turn the ship to form a lee for the boarding team.

Such “little” problems couldn’t deter a gung-ho “jay-gee,” so I told my Japanese counterpart—a lieutenant commander—we could proceed if he approved. He did, so we agreed we would forge ahead with our boarding craft at an accelerated speed of 10 knots, instead of 5, and we planned to board from the MPS’ windward side. Excited about our boarding, I herded our large team to

the frigate’s fantail to wait for the boat from the JMSDF destroyer to pick us up and take us to the commercial ship for boarding.

My apprehension skyrocketed when I saw the approaching Japanese craft: It was a wooden, motor whaleboat (MWB) probably more than 50 years old! Where was the RHIB? I’d never been in one of these old vessels, and, to me, it looked like a bathtub bobbing in heavy seas. The coxswain also appeared to be having difficulty maintaining a steady course in the heavy seas off Sasebo’s coast.

I gulped and glanced at the Japanese officer to see if he displayed any doubt; he didn’t, so we boarded the motor whaleboat and began our transit to the MPS.

The seas became more menacing—I sat astern of the coxswain—and almost every swell brought water into the boat. I also was shocked that, even at max speed, we barely were closing in on the large MPS. Nonetheless, we charged on!

After an exhausting 1500-yard trip, our motor whaleboat finally approached alongside the large, converted car-carrier. Our fearless coxswain slammed the old wooden boat into the side of the MPS, which now appeared gargantuan this close. The coxswain kept us there, despite all the water coming over our bow.

The boat and the ship continued to slam together as large swells rolled in. We were on the MPS’ port side and began listing heavily to starboard as the MPS kept driving the motor whaleboat down on our inboard side. We were about to capsize! When the Japanese sailors realized this danger, they gave out a collective yelp—even the lieutenant commander—and quickly shifted to the motor whaleboat’s port side. We now were in



Navy photo by PH2 Aaron Peterson, Fleet Combat Camera Atlantic

One way for terrorists to enter the U.S. illegally could be aboard merchant ships, hence the renewed importance of training visit, board, search and seizure (VBSS) teams. The teams accompany deployed units and inspect ships entering U.S. ports.

danger of capsizing to port as water poured in at an accelerated pace.

Afraid, I told the Japanese officer we needed to board the ship via its pilot ladder, which was dangling from a huge accommodation ladder. He acknowledged and led by example, rushing to the ladder and reaching. . .and reaching, to climb. The ladder only extended to about shoulder-height, making it impossible for the officer to step from the motor whaleboat to the pilot ladder. I suddenly grabbed him and—to my surprise—threw him up the ladder. He scrambled like I've never before seen a man scramble. It continued: I grabbed and threw the Japanese sailors onto the ladder, and they scrambled up to the ship's deck.

The rest of the boarding was uneventful, and, when we had completed the drill, the ship's master turned so we could debark in a lee. What a lee he

gave us! The water was as calm as a milk pond when we left the mammoth vessel.

Reflecting on that “exciting” exercise, I shake my head in disbelief. I since have attended a three-day, operational risk management application and integration course and now realize I did not practice risk management to make sure the VBSS team operated with minimal risk.

Here is what I would do today when planning such an exercise:

I would apply deliberate risk management to the entire exercise and start with arranging exercise events in chronological order. Then I would employ hazard identification: the what-if tool. What if the sea state was too heavy? What if the motor whaleboat took on water? What if none of the Japanese sailors spoke English?

I then would brainstorm for potential hazards until I couldn't think of any more. I'd ask a fellow officer to read my list to make sure I hadn't missed anything.

With potential hazards now identified, each would be assigned a severity between one (death or grave damage of national interest) and four (a



Navy photo by PH1(AW) Tina M. Ackerman

A VBSS team not only faces risks when aboard a foreign vessel, but getting aboard can be a challenge. Approaching in rough seas, boarding methods, and attempting to board against the wishes of the ship's captain all pose their own dangers.

hazard with minimal threat). I then would assign the hazards a probability, ranging from likely-to-occur to unlikely-to-occur.

Using the assigned severity and probability to enter into the risk-assessment code (RAC) matrix reveals a RAC for each event: 1 for critical; 2 for serious; 3 for moderate; 4 for minor; and 5 for negligible.

My next step would be to determine how to control the high risks. I could build sea-state criteria into the pre-exercise brief so everyone would know at what sea-state we would cancel the exercise. In my VBSS-team brief, I would include guidance telling team members to spread out evenly in the motor whaleboat to avoid capsizing. I also would

make sure team members understood all commands. I could build boarding-ladder requirements into the pre-exercise brief so the MPS master would know where we needed the ladder lowered to board and to conduct the exercise.

After chronologically listing exercise events and identifying and assessing risks, I finally would implement the controls and monitor their effectiveness. This final ORM step is critical to identify needed adjustments.

Using these steps would have reduced the risks involved with this VBSS exercise. For instance, ORM would have enabled me to evaluate the ship's speed and lack of a lee during boarding, the sea-state, and operating restrictions and limitations of a motor whaleboat. Would I have continued the VBSS? I don't know, but had I done so, the exercise would have been much safer and more effective by applying ORM during all phases. 🌊