



Maintainers in a



Hot-pump and crew switches “in country” can test anyone’s nerves.



By AT1(AW) Aaron Sheldon

Our first recovery wasn’t the ordinary kind. After all, how often does a group of E-2C maintainers, who expect to spend their entire deployment aboard ship, find themselves deployed to a former Russian Air Force base in northern Afghanistan? That fact is strange enough, but this base had the added excitement of leftover Russian mines, RPG attacks, and Taliban forces near the airfield.

Attached to CVW-1 aboard USS *Enterprise*, we were in the Arabian Gulf on a regularly scheduled six-month deployment and were tasked to provide support for Operation Mountain Resolve. A small group of maintainers were detached to Bagram, Afghanistan. Because of the transit time from the Arabian Sea to the operating area and the E-2C’s inability to refuel in-flight, our Hawkeyes needed to hot-pump before

flying their mission and once more for the trip back to the boat. Our job was to support that hot-pump and crew-switch process and to do any minor maintenance that might have sprung up on the transit to the airfield or on the return from station.

We pre-briefed and used ORM as much as possible, even though we had little information about the airfield. We met again after receiving our welcome-aboard brief from field services upon arrival at Bagram. Every task taken for granted on the ship now had new meaning on this airfield of dust and rock. Instead of float coats and flashlights, we wore flak vests and guns. We traded our cranials for helmets.

We were operating at a quick pace on an unfamiliar airfield, trying to adapt to the high-tempo ops. We had to hot-pump on Golf taxiway at one end of the runway, then recover or shut down on the opposite end. This piece of territory was Alpha taxiway, more commonly known as sniper alley. Our gear was stored off the taxiway and on the edge of a field.

While recovering aircraft 602 on Alpha taxiway, an Air Force C-17 was parked on the same taxiway. Because the airfield was blacked out at night, the C-17

Minefield?

That Calls for ORM

didn't see our little E-2C in its path, so our aircrew flashed the taxi lights, and the C-17 flashed its taxi lights to acknowledge us. To take off, the C-17 needed to do a 180-degree turn on the taxiway and then taxi to the other end of the airfield. When it turned, the exhaust blew directly on us, sending our gear deep into a field next to the taxiway.

The dust settled, and our first thoughts were to recover our gear, which now was scattered in an open field. We suddenly remembered our welcome-aboard brief. They had told us about the minefields around the base, and we even had discussed what to do should we have to veer from the designated paths.

Instead of running into the field, we notified airfield management about the problem, and we decided to recover the Hawkeye without our cranials. Yes, *Mech* editor, the choice not to wear them was an easy one. The other option was not too appealing. When we got word the next day, the base people said the Army Corps of Engineers would look at their maps to see if the field was cleared. It turned out the field was 99.5 percent clear of mines. Our detachment LCPO recovered our gear.

Our group was trained to work under unusual conditions and for the challenges posed on the flight deck,



but none of us were trained to work around minefields. Despite that shortcoming, we quickly applied the principles of ORM throughout the detachment. Those process enabled us to do this unusual mission with no incidents. ORM works, and this det gave us the experience to talk of its benefits to the rest of our squadron. 

Petty Officer Sheldon is a QAR at VAW-123.

Touché on the cranial. Thank you for the firsthand account of a normal mission, in an unusual place, and under abnormal conditions. The lessons you learned and now share will go a long way toward keeping other Sailors safe in similar situations. Oh, by the way, the group photo with jackets pulled aside so everyone can see the guns didn't go unnoticed.—Ed.

