

The Day We “Stole” a Crane (An ORM Story)

A crane lifts a missile
aboard a destroyer.

Navy photo by Ltjg. Joel Jackson

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This story is as factual as my memory will permit. In place of names, I have used descriptive pseudonyms to protect the identity of the actual personnel involved. For the affected CO: This story is probably the first inkling you will get of what could have happened “on your watch.”

A new ensign and first-time division officer encounters many distractions and miss-steps on the way to “getting the big picture.” I was no different—and I was extremely intimidated by my CO, Cdr. Screamer. He had a withering ability to criticize his officers and to let us know how displeased he was with our perceived shortcomings. Commander Screamer could ruin your whole day with a single visit to the bridge during your watch. For some reason, he could

make the most eloquent officer stammer and stutter his way through a contact report, or at least that’s what I did.

Our ship, the USS *Cru-Des*, DD-9.., was in port for a maintenance availability before a scheduled long underway period. It was a time of vigorous activity and work. Coordination and flexibility were needed to ensure that contractors, SIMA and ship's force could get all the jobs done and have the ship ready for operational commitments. As

the ship's first lieutenant, I was trying to complete some external preservation. I also served as the ship's crane coordinator. In this latter capacity, I had to arrange for a PWC crane and operator to lift heavy equipment and supplies to and from the ship to support all the ongoing work.

My every encounter with Cdr. Screamer gave me the shakes, and the private floggings were just as heated as the public tongue-lashings. I felt I never was going to get anywhere in my career, and I'm reasonably sure many of my fellow JOs felt the same way.

Near the end of the maintenance availability, a "hot job" came up—one of the ship's fire pumps needed to be rebuilt at the SIMA shop. As SIMA workers were rigging the pump topside, I called Mr. Crane Guy at PWC and scheduled a crane for the next morning. Mr. Crane Guy usually required three days' notice, so I was pleased to get such quick response. The pump was lifted and promptly went to the shop.

A few days later, the fire pump was repaired and brought back to the ship on a truck. No one had called me, so I hadn't arranged for a crane lift. Both the main propulsion assistant and the engineer officer badgered me about our lack of a crane. I was pleading with Mr. Crane Guy on the telephone when I heard the 1MC announcement, "*First lieutenant, lay to the captain's cabin!*" My legs somehow propelled me up the ladder to the CO's cabin. For the life of me, I can't recall exactly what he said to me, but I do remember something to the effect of "*...I don't care how you do it—just do it!*"

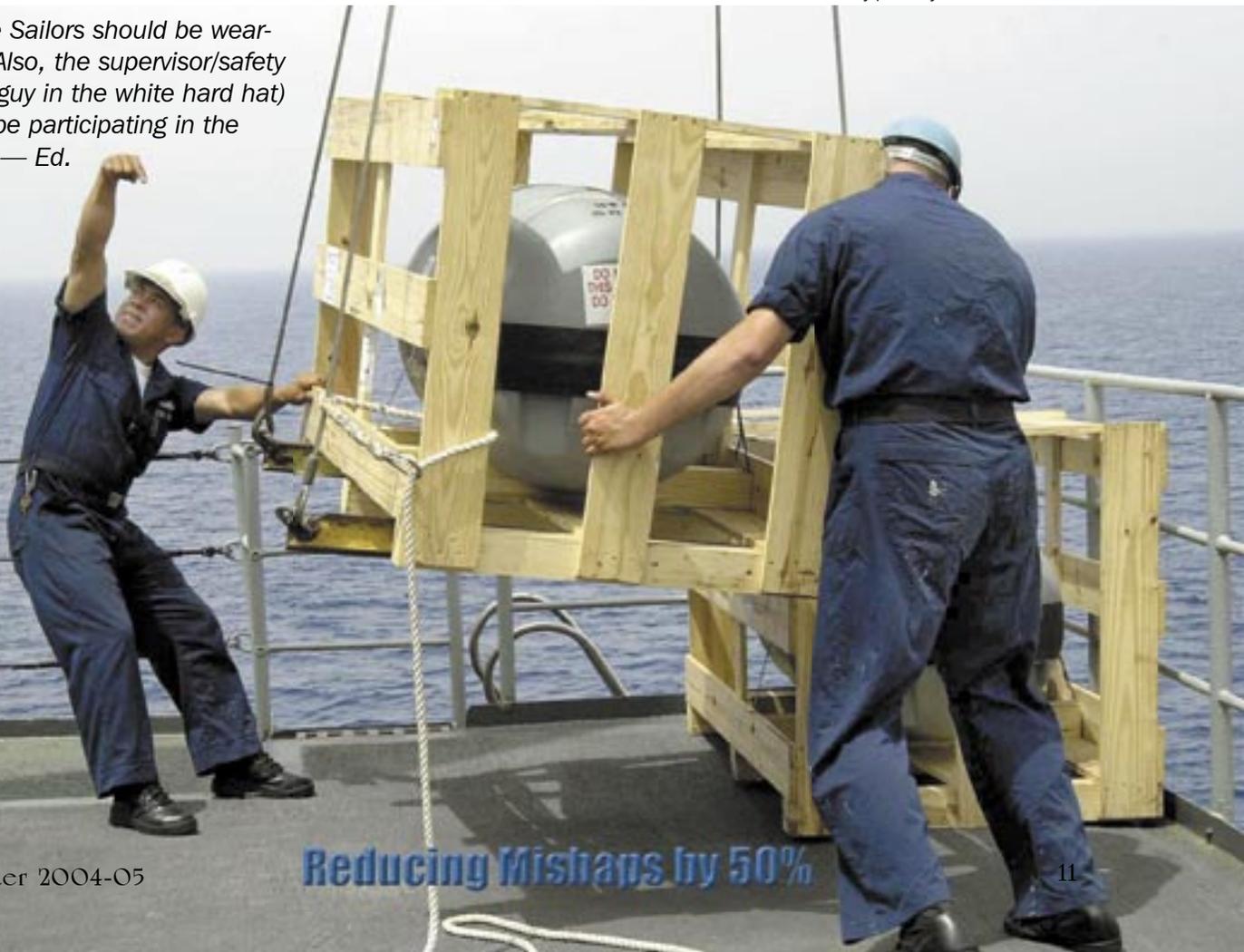
I quickly called Mr. Crane Guy back and listened as he explained that he simply couldn't meet our needs because of other commitments and because PWC was short-staffed for crane operators that day. It was particularly disappointing to see the ship across the pier getting stores lifted aboard when our emergent work could not be supported.

Feeling particularly stressed, I consulted with my LPO, BM1 Old Salt. I was interested in seeing

A boatswain's mate directs a crane operator to lower a load while another Sailor assists.

Navy photo by PH2 Todd Reeves

Note: These Sailors should be wearing gloves. Also, the supervisor/safety officer (the guy in the white hard hat) should not be participating in the operations. — Ed.



if he knew some other method of rigging the pump aboard. We discussed using a J-bar davit and falls but realized it was too difficult to rig that way. Old Salt couldn't help me.

Fortune smiled during lunch, though. BM1 Old Salt excitedly called me and said he could solve our problems. The PWC crane operator had finished the stores load across the pier and had departed for his lunch break. The pier crane was unattended. This was no time for thoughtful consideration—we were going to lift that pump!

BM1 Old Salt was confident he could operate the crane; it was “not much different” from one he had operated *once* before. He had a mischievous

pump landed softly and undamaged on deck. Who cares, right?

To Cdr. Screamer, I'd just like to say, “We did as you asked. I never told you about ‘stealing’ the crane because you never commented about it. The pump was aboard, and that was the end of the matter. However, I would ask you to consider the twist your tour as CO **could** have taken that day. I certainly have thought about how my career could have changed. I'll bet it would have been hard to explain to the commodore how a crane came to topple into your ship, how a fire pump fell into the water, how a PWC crane was damaged beyond repair, why a fire pump needs another repair, or

For the life of me, I can't recall exactly what he said to me, but I do remember something to the effect of
“...I don't care how you do it—just do it!”

twinkle in his eye as he maneuvered the crane into place and lowered the hook. I gave him a tip of my white hard hat when it looked good to me and the pump was secured to the hook. The lift went smoothly, and the pump was lowered to the deck without mishap.

As BM1 Old Salt was lowering and stowing the boom, a very agitated PWC crane operator came running and cursing his way down the pier. Old Salt and I grinned at each other as the shouts got louder. We successfully had bucked the system and accomplished our mission. I nodded and blinked vacantly as the real crane operator excitedly gave me “what ifs” and voiced concerns about his undamaged equipment. No harm, no foul; the job was done, and this guy had no reason to complain, right? Aside from a very unpleasant phone call from Mr. Crane Guy, I never had any action taken against me. Of course, I never got another favor from Mr. Crane Guy.

What could have happened? An unqualified Sailor had operated the crane. We didn't extend the outrigger feet to prevent the crane from toppling over. We lifted the pump with some line from the bosun locker, instead of using a proper lifting sling. We tied a bowline, instead of using a shackle. The

why one or more of your Sailors were injured or killed. I suggest to you that we simply got real lucky that day.”

We should have applied the principles of operational risk management:

✓ **Accept risk when the benefits outweigh the cost.**

Would a 24-hour delay have been tragic? In this case, probably not.

✓ **Accept no unnecessary risks.**

Is an unqualified Sailor using unfamiliar equipment the right choice? Clearly a poor choice.

✓ **Anticipate and manage risks by planning.**

This entire evolution was reactive—no planning was evident. We had poor ship-to-shore coordination; communication could have helped all parties to understand what was needed.

✓ **Make risk decisions at the right level.**

Is the safety of your crew, ship and career in the hands of a “green” division officer? Are you sure? Does your leadership style encourage feedback and tolerate bad news? If you “shoot the messenger” often enough, subordinates may hesitate to give you the “big picture” when it's important. 📡