

The Missile Shot That Never Was



By Ltjg. Steve Audelo

What a great deal. Just six months out of the FRS, I was selected for the crew that would fire the first Penguin missile from an SH-60B in six years. This was a tremendous opportunity, and I felt lucky. The ex-USS *Guam* would be sunk during COMPTUEX, and our detachment was to be involved. LAMPS aircraft were going to launch a series of Hellfire missiles and one Penguin.

The HAC, AW and I had become involved in all aspects of the Penguin missile and our shot. The event was briefed, and every contingency was mapped out. The ship, the DESRON, our squadron, and, especially, our fellow HSL bubbas in the battlegroup and back home were going to watch us through a microscope. We sure didn't want to screw up.

The night before the shoot, I briefed the event to the DESRON and the ship's wardroom. I covered every detail of the shot: Where we were going to be when we fired, what we would do if we had computer problems, and what we would do if the missile failed to leave the rail. This last subject seemed so remote; jokes even were made about it.

After the brief, I walked to the hangar and checked in with the guys to review the scenario for the next day. I then went to bed and tried to sleep but couldn't.

We had an early start the next day. The aircraft was spotted on deck a few hours before the launch so the load team could do their work. Release and control checks were completed, and the missile was loaded on the aircraft. We soon were ready to

launch. It was a gorgeous morning, and we looked forward to the flight.

After launch, we headed toward our loiter point to wait our turn. As time passed, we repeatedly went through the scenario. We had an assigned firing bearing, and we went over the different trajectory options to get the best acquisition and kill. Finally, our time came.

With the missile warmed up and aligned for target, we headed to the firing point. As we got closer, I went over the checklist to make sure no steps were skipped and everything looked right. The cockpit indications were right on, and everything was ready to go. I called out the countdown over the radios and, on the third "now," pressed the launch button.

This is where everything seemed to slow down. I waited for a few seconds, expecting a little delay. The HAC, who was at the controls, waited for the kick associated with the missile release. The AW in the back looked out his window and waited for the drop. The lights in the armament-control-indicator panel went out, and nothing happened. We were a little perplexed; the missile still was with us.

The excitement didn't stop there. We realized the missile wasn't going anywhere, but the canards and the seeker head began to move. We knew the seeker was active, but the missile wasn't talking to the aircraft anymore, and it was trying to fly.

Our first thought was to jettison the missile, but we saw no indication the missile rack was locked or unlocked. We had no idea how the missile still was holding on to the aircraft, or if it would stay on when we tried to land. The jettison point was 75

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Photo by Ted Carlson

miles away. We continued with the NATOPS procedure for a hang-fire, which allows 30 minutes for the battery to drain if extended flight is possible. We did the mental math to figure just how long we could remain airborne. Fortunately, 30 minutes also gave us time to think about all the available options. While gas would be tight, we had enough for several alternatives.

We looked at two options: to proceed to the carrier and let the EOD team unload the missile, or return to our ship and unload. We considered these options, but, at the time, we weren't sure how stable the missile was on the launch assembly. A third option was to jettison the missile. We told the controlling E-2 we planned to jettison and headed in that direction.

We had regained comms with our ship and relayed what had happened. We also discussed what we wanted to do with our bubbas on the boat. By that time, they had contacted tech reps on the beach and gave us good news. They had determined the missile would not launch inadvertently after the battery was drained. With this knowledge, we turned our nose toward Mom and headed home. We shot an alpha-pattern approach to an uneventful clear-deck landing.

I'll have to admit, I just was happy to be back on the boat. In fact, that flight deck never looked so

good. We only had one-and-a-half days left on this underway period, and we would be back in Mayport.

It was a good COMPTUEX. I learned a lot and had great experiences I won't forget. We had good crew coordination in the aircraft, and I think this is a good example of how CRM can be used. Being type-A personalities, we want to fix the problem right now. The 30 minutes we had to evaluate the situation afforded us the chance to step back and review our options and resources. CRM is discussed as an aircrew resource, but, in this case, it worked outside as well. We used the resources available in the helicopter, but, in the end, it was good crew coordination inside and outside the cockpit that allowed us to make an informed decision. 🦅

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