ORM Corner

My First SAR

By LCdr. Dave Bouve

An FRS instructor told me there are two types of helicopter pilots: those who have been involved in a search and rescue, and those who will be.

We were two months into what was shaping up to be an extremely successful cruise. Operation Enduring Freedom was in full swing. My detachment was assigned to USS *Leyte Gulf* (CG 55), and we were supporting Maritime Interdiction Operations (MIO) in the northern Arabian Gulf with USS *Peterson* (DD 969) and other coalition and U.S. ships.

Merchant vessels awaiting inspection by boarding teams were detained together at an anchorage. One of these vessels was the MV *Smara*, a 250-foot cargo ship that had been converted to smuggle oil. The vessel had a crew of 14 and was in poor material condition. The *Smara* had been intercepted and was at the holding anchorage with an eight-man security team from *Peterson* onboard.

It was 0415, and my crew was in Proud Warrior 437, finishing a surveillance mission off the coast of Kuwait. A *shamal* had been developing throughout the night. The winds had increased to 30 to 40 knots, and the seas were 8 to 10 feet. We had launched at 0200 and were ready to fly 60 miles back to the ship when we received a call from our ship that *Smara* was capsizing in the heavy seas. The crew and security team were preparing to abandon ship.

We put the TACAN needle on the nose and pulled max power. We were told a few minutes later the ship had gone down, and all 22 people were in the water.

We landed on our ship, refueled and embarked a rescue swimmer. While we briefed on deck and fueled, we could see Magnum 443 (from *Peterson)* in a hover a few hundred yards off our port beam. They were airborne, had located a survivor, and had deployed their rescue swimmer. We established radio comms with them and learned their rescue strop had separated from the swimmer and hook. Because of the darkness, wind and seas, the rescue swimmer had to attend to the survivor and wait for another means of pickup. Magnum 443 marked the position of their swimmer with smoke and moved off.

We launched, moved in, lowered our strop, and the Magnum swimmer hooked up the survivor for pickup. After we hoisted him into the cabin, we again lowered the hoist and retrieved the swimmer. They were covered head to toe in crude oil from a massive slick that had formed over the site of the sinking. The oil draining off our passengers covered everything in the cabin.

As we departed, we spotted another survivor straight ahead. We reentered a doppler approach and established another night hover over the survivor. Our wet swimmer already was in the door, and, as my pilot maintained position via calls from the hoist operator, the swimmer was lowered into the huge, oil-covered swells. He almost

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was blinded from the wind-driven spray and oil that soon covered his mask and face. Nevertheless, he disconnected, swam to the survivor, checked him for injuries, and signaled for pickup. They were hoisted into the cabin, and the AWs treated the survivors for shock and hypothermia, although the main problem with everyone was the ingested oil.

We had seven people onboard but only five seats, so we had to land to make room in the back and to get medical attention for the survivors. We also had to get the Magnum swimmer offloaded so his helo could pick him up and get back into the game. Unfortunately, our only options were *Peterson* and *Leyte Gulf*, which were conducting small-boat ops to aid the SAR effort.

The ship was DIW and broadside to the winds and seas to form lees—the rolls and winds were way out of limits. We opted to land aboard *Peterson,* since it was closest. I briefly considered an RA recovery on the wire, but it was hazardous to send hookup men on the deck in the dark. It would take time to set up, and we still would have been out of the envelope. We decided to try a free-deck recovery into the RSD.

When dawn began to break, I guarded the controls and let my pilot continue with the approach. He had done a great job flying so far. The deck was rolling up to 10 degrees, and winds were 35 knots from starboard. We waited for a relatively stable deck and landed into the RSD. Once trapped, we offloaded our three passengers and immediately relaunched.

My AWs donned NVGs to help search for more survivors, and I periodically flipped mine down, as well. My crewmen in the back spotted another survivor, and we moved in for pickup. My wet swimmer again went down the hoist and fought the wind, waves, oil, and debris to get to the survivor. When we hoisted him aboard, it was clear this guy was in bad shape. He was incoherent and threw up crude oil. My crewmen got him on his side, and we bustered back to *Peterson* to drop him off.

The ship had turned 180 degrees, and winds were directly from the port side, making the roll just as bad. While I fought to lean into the port winds and maintain position over the starboard-canted deck, the senior crewman told me the survivor was having chest pains. I told the deck

contact that once I landed, into the RSD or not, I immediately wanted chocks and chains. The LSO rogered up.

I tried to anticipate a deck roll back to something close to level, and I planted the collective. Unfortunately, my probe landed about six inches too far back on top of the RSD. We weren't moving, and my copilot signalled for chocks and chains. With my left arm locked down on the collective, the survivor was taken into the hangar, while I looked for any sign of sliding. The chock-and-chain runners had done a good job, and we weren't going anywhere. The AWs jumped back in, the deck crew broke us down, and we relaunched. After another 90 minutes of unsuccessful searching, we flew to *Leyte Gulf* for gas and a crewswap.

Through it all, the small boats had been busy plucking survivors from the oily water. The search continued for two days. In the end, 16 of the 22 people who had abandoned ship were recovered. Sadly, the other six, including two Navy security-team members, were lost.

Several lessons were learned. It never occurred to me to brief my crewmen about the consequences of jumping into an oil slick, a possibility whenever a ship sinks. Besides the hazards to the swimmer, the oil that covered everything in the cabin made it difficult for the hoist operator to work.

Our SAR brief didn't cover where we would take injured survivors or the effect of boat ops, which we should have anticipated. We mainly were concerned with getting refueled and airborne as soon as possible.

In retrospect, I should have worked at my landing on *Peterson* until I got it into the RSD. I thought in terms of the medical emergency in the back, and it all worked out. I didn't think the roll was bad enough to tip or slide us. However, if the aircraft had started to move while I had on the chocks and chains, all we could have done was hang on. The RSD is designed to hold the helo in place in rolls much worse than 10 degrees. I made the risk evaluation, but the final step in the ORM process should have been to implement controls to make sure I ended up in the RSD to minimize the risk of sliding on the deck. I made a hundred decisions that morning, and I applied ORM to most of them, some consciously, some without being aware of it. You need to get through all the steps in the ORM process.

LCdr. Bouve wrote this article while assigned to HSL-42 Det 2, onboard USS *Leyte Gulf*.

My wet swimmer again went down the hoist and fought the wind, waves, oil, and debris to get to the survivor.

AW2 Ashley Hauck and AW2 Erik Carroll were the SAR crew members in this event.