

Crew Resource Management

You, Too, Can Schem

Situational Awareness

Assertiveness

Decision-Making

Leadership

Communication

Adaptability/Flexibility

Mission Analysis

Last fall, my command put “all the necessary links in place” for a mishap. How it happened was a real eye-opener. I was motivated to write this article because my squared-away, fleet helo squadron, with a proactive safety program, easily fell prey to not paying attention to the business at hand. I hope to grab your ear and keep you from making the same mistake.

We had had a strong fly-week at the squadron. On Thursday afternoon, my XO gave me a heads-up on a Wing requirement to transport several GAU-16 machine guns and associated hardware from NAS North Island to the Naval Strike Air Warfare Center (NSAWC) at NAS Fallon. The NSAWC staff needed the gear to support a Seahawk Weapons and Tactics Instructor (SWTI) course the following Tuesday. The Wing pulsed fleet squadrons along the HSL flight line to see if anyone could divert a scheduled flight on Friday to get the gear to NAS Fallon. This tasking was straightforward, certainly not out-of-the-box. However, as the word filtered down to squadron ops officers, the urgency to do this mission naturally ratcheted up.

As the crow flies, the distance is only 600 miles. For fixed-wing aircraft, it is a one-leg flight. For an SH-60B—on a good day with good winds—it is about a five-hour, two-leg flight with one en-route stop for fuel. However, with any headwind, the flight can turn into three legs and two fuel stops. Weather was not expected to be a factor—the freezing level would be slightly above the SH-60B’s ceiling of 10,000 feet. To top it off, flying IFR was not an option because all the minimum en-route altitude (MEA) combinations exceeded 10,000 feet. So, flying VFR meant the aircraft would be at or near this ceiling, over unfamiliar mountainous terrain, to an unfamiliar destination, with a junior aircrew.

On Friday morning, the command participated in morning PT and team sports. Then we had an AOM, training for the enlisted aircrew, and a maintenance day. I approved a light flight schedule for the day that consisted of a local-area flight for a junior aircrew.

The Wing requirement to get these guns to NAS Fallon still was valid. My ops officer determined that commercial-overnight delivery or the station’s C-12 were not viable options to move the gear. After a mid-morning discussion with Wing Operations, my ops officer said the command could do it with the scheduled aircrew and aircraft. Every naval aviator seemingly has a built in “can do” switch spring-loaded to the on position—we were no exception. Factor in that the



CRM Contacts:

Cdr. Scott Stroble, OPNAV N789F3
CRM Program Mgr.
stroble.scott@hq.anvy.mil, DSN 664-7721

CRM Model Mgr. Pensacola, Fla.
www.act.navy.mil, DSN 922-2088

LCdr. Mike Reddix, Naval Safetycenter
mreddix@safetycenter.navy.mil
(757) 444-3520, Ext. 7277

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By Cdr. Jim Gillcrist

upcoming Monday was a national holiday, and we had ourselves a real mission. So, I reluctantly accepted.

All this transpired through the morning as the XO and I worked “important squadron issues.” In so doing, we lost sight of mission execution. I had assumed the aircrew would remain overnight after the delivery and return the next day. To me, this was a no-brainer. But the aircrew, which consisted of a newly designated helicopter aircraft commander (HAC), a slightly more seasoned HAC as copilot, and a junior aircrewman, wanted to fly there and return the same day. This made sense to the aircrew, I think, because the HAC had big plans for the long weekend. Can-do was the motto at the moment. The squadron and chain of command worked end of the week business, while I approved this change in the daily flight schedule. As a team, we had the best intentions to get the job done.

I hope you can begin to see how we wrote a flight schedule with “all the necessary links in place” for a mishap.

So what happened? Our daring aircrew planned and filed the mission to get the gear there and fly back the same day. Weather was holding. With a few aircraft issues thrown in and the preflight completed before noon, we were 1.5 hours behind the originally scheduled launch. Nonetheless, we pressed on, ready to launch.

Next, the funniest thing happened. I walked out of my office and bumped into the aircrew milling about rather oddly in the hallway. I approached them and asked, “What’s the hold-up?” As we peeled back the onion, it became apparent that the aircrew had come back into the squadron to reevaluate the entire mission. They actually had strapped on the aircraft and were at “start engines” on the checklist. The feeling in the pit of their stomachs that all was not right caused them to return to the squadron. The planning was poor, and the CO’s reluctant

approval of the mission was worse. We needed to take a time out. And, we did!

I cancelled the mission on the spot, with a huge sigh of relief from the junior HAC who had signed for the aircraft. After talking with the Wing and NSAWC folks running the SWTI class, I learned that the guns were needed no later than close of business on Tuesday. The decision was simple. We decided to get an early start on Tuesday, deliver the gear, remain overnight, and return Wednesday.

Why hadn’t we followed this course of action in the beginning? What happened to the oversight of the front office CO and XO team to recognize a mishap? Why didn’t I have the gumption to just say “no” to a half-baked plan? These questions bothered me and made me wonder how often other squared-away fleet squadrons unknowingly set themselves up for this kind of scenario. 🦁

Cdr. Jim Gillcrist flew with the HSL-43 BattleCats.

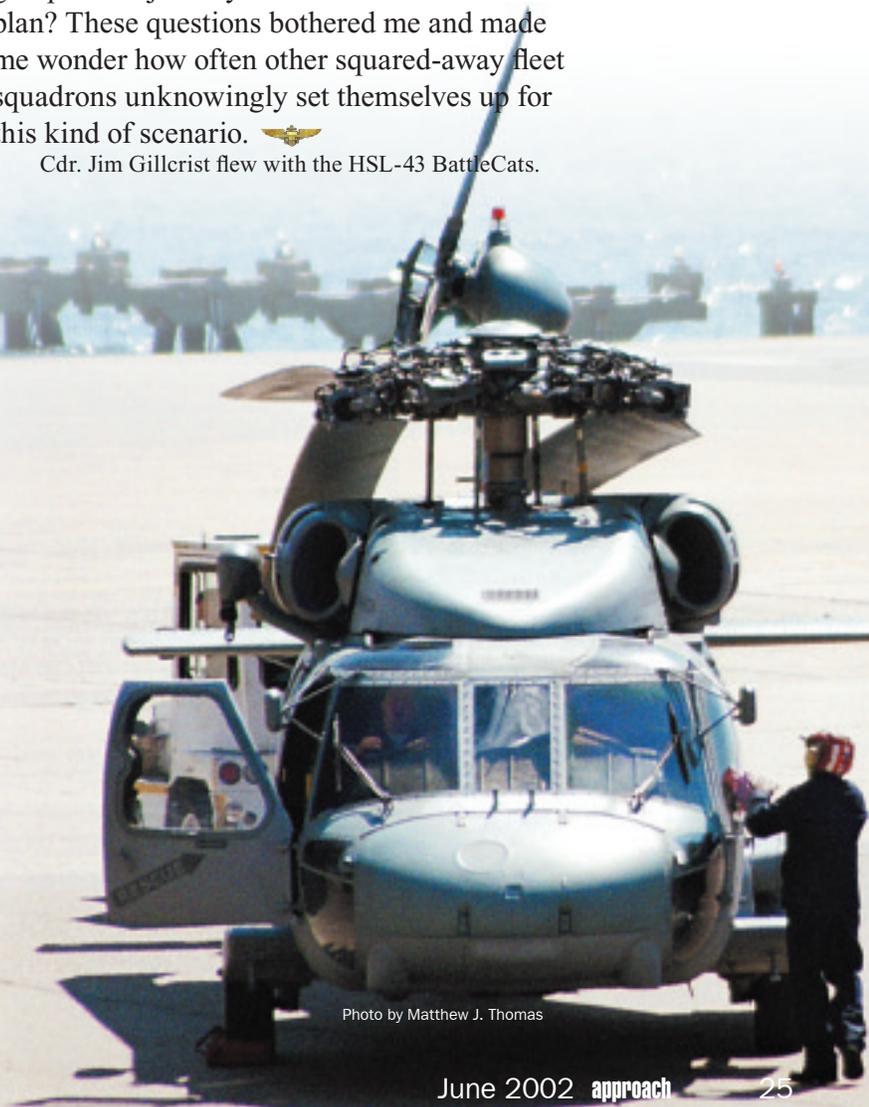


Photo by Matthew J. Thomas