

ORM Corner

THE FINAL COUNTDOWN

By Lt. J. Mario Gonzalez

We all walked away, and the helo flew again, but not because we were the best pilots ever to walk the face of the earth, nor because we planned for every contingency. We looked back and chalked it up to something greater than luck; maybe God just smiled down on us despite the situation into which we had gotten ourselves.

ORA Center

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It was week one of a standard work-up for our HSL detachment onboard a Norfolk DD. The ship had left port and headed south to conduct exercises in the Puerto Rican Op Area. One morning, early in the exercise, we were called to combat and told our scheduled day-proficiency flight was changed to a pax transfer of an emergency-leave case from a sister ship.

We said, “No problem,” and then told the key folks, split planning responsibilities, and shortly were ready to go. We were 250 miles south-southeast of West Palm Beach and 200 miles off shore. We also were tasked to bring back our work-up advisor from week one. Our emergency-leave case was on a DDG about 70 miles away. We decided to use the DDG as a lily pad for fuel, since they were about 150 miles from land. The weather was reported as VMC with ceilings at 3,000 feet, so we planned on a final stop at Mayport. To prepare for our return, the DDG was to remain 150 miles abeam of West Palm Beach to fuel us. Our mother (DD) was to continue south toward the op area and not to exceed 150 miles from our lily pad.

Just when everything seemed like it would go our way, we faced a 180-degree turn of events. We made it to the DD and picked up the passenger but had difficulty taking on fuel. The pump room couldn’t raise enough pressure, and we burned fuel as fast as we took it on. Finally, the boys in purple got the system running 4.0, and we launched after almost an hour on deck.

To make up for lost time, we decided to take the straight shot to Mayport, instead of completing the other two sides of the triangle: West Palm and then to Mayport. We had the fuel, good weather, and a good datalink with our controlling ship. As the distance from our ship opened, we climbed to maintain comms and navigational aids. We soon were in the goo but still had the warm fuzzy of good comms with mother. We finally picked up

land-based TACANs and proceeded to our destination. We broke out of the goo 20 miles south of Mayport and continued in VMC.

By the time we planned for the return, took care of our pax, fueled and headed back, we were well into the afternoon. We flew IFR to West Palm and got gas just in case our luck continued the way it had been all morning. We encountered yet another delay getting fuel and phoned the ships to tell them. We took off, proceeded high into the goo, and headed to our planned fuel rendezvous with the DDG.

Bingo fuel now was our highest priority. We flew on, talked to no one, and approached the point of no return. Tension rose as we continued to call over datalink and the radios, getting no answer. Shortly before reaching our bingo, the DDG answered over VHF. They had turned off their datalink and TACAN but had a good radar paint on us. They brought up all their equipment, set a green deck, and we raced in for fuel. Night was fast approaching. On deck, the grapes were having the same pumping problem as before. We watched the sun set, and night was upon us. We knew then mother was heading south and getting farther away every second. An hour later, we had a full tank of gas, and we blazed our way south at max-range airspeed with all eyes on the fuel gauge and on the clock.

The ceiling was solid at 1,000 feet, and we opted to stay below it in VMC. We pressed on into the darkness toward yet another bingo, all the while staring at an empty radar screen.

In the distance, we could see the sky illuminate with the brilliance of lightning, but we were too low to break out anything on the scopes. We had a moment of levity when our crewman said, “Wouldn’t it be great if mom was in the middle of some huge thunderstorm?” We laughed and reassured him our aviation counterparts would take care of situations like that and steer mom

away from hazardous conditions. A short time later, that guy “Murphy” came to the cockpit and slapped us around a little bit.

As we rapidly approached bingo, we got comms over link with mother. They were setting flight quarters and were waiting to take us in. We passed our bingo and headed toward mom—over 90 miles away. Shortly later, the ASTAC told us they were having a major engineering casualty. They had to stop one shaft and were limited to eight knots but still were maneuverable and could land us. We realized we couldn’t make it back to

We dropped our gear and ran inside for cover.

the beach. We had a slim chance of finding the DDG we had left over an hour ago, since it was heading back to Norfolk at liberty speed. We knew mom was our only hope.

The light show was getting extremely close and was in mother’s direction. The storm appeared on the radar about 10 miles away from mom, heading toward the ship at 30 mph—there was no outrunning this one. It was a frightening sight: We didn’t have enough fuel to fly around it, we couldn’t beat it to mother, and mom couldn’t outrun it. We were going to go head-to-head with nature. Everyone in the helo thought the same thing, but it was the crewman that finally said it aloud, “Oh, this ...!”

When we were within 30 miles of mom, the lightning was striking every few seconds. Our LSO came on the radio and told us conditions there were not ideal. By now, the leading edge of the storm was walloping mom.

Even though we dreaded the answer, we finally asked the LSO, “Are you guys getting hit with this storm?”

He replied, “Have you ever seen that movie, *The Final Countdown*?”

After those “calming” words, we prepared for landing, and we desperately searched for a way through the soup. Our crewman spotted what appeared to be a thin spot on the radar. We pulled torque and accelerated toward what seemed our one and only chance of penetrating the fury.

The wind, turbulence and rain, not to mention the lightning striking everywhere, made

it difficult to fly the aircraft. As we punched through the lightest part of the storm, we saw mother’s lights in the distance. It looked as though the rain was tapering in a perfect corridor, leading us home.

As we approached the ship, the calm passed, and the storm kicked up again. My copilot talked me through the approach, and the crewman made closure calls. We crossed the missile deck and set down the aircraft in the trap.

Being on deck offered a wonderful sense of security, but we weren’t out of the woods yet. We quickly shut down, and our first priority was to straighten the aircraft and get it in the hangar. The LSO maneuvered the aircraft, and we stood by anxiously waiting to fold the tail. The storm blew at full force, and the lightning was getting closer. As we ran out to fold the tail, the lightning seemed to be drawn to the ship. We dropped our gear and ran inside for cover. When the last man had run through the door, we slammed it. We stood there soaked to the bone and traded a few choice expletives. All of a sudden, wham! A lightning bolt of seemingly monstrous proportions struck just outside the hangar door. We thought it slammed into the flight deck, but no one was about to check.

We stepped back from the door and retreated farther into the skin of the ship until the storm subsided. When it was clear, the maintenance crew finished the traversing evolution. Once inside, we saw the aircraft apparently had been on the receiving end of that ferocious lightning bolt that had sent us running. Everyone was at a loss for words. We knew only moments had separated our safety from a ringside seat for that last lightning blast. We realized we had escaped death or severe injury.

As a naval officer and pilot, I pride myself on being good at my job. That night taught me a valuable lesson. Piloting is not only about flying skills. Planning and ongoing ORM will keep you out of most hairy situations. That day and night, we decided to keep pushing toward our goal, and it almost killed us. There are just some things in this world you don’t mess with. No pilot is a match for Mother Nature, and any pilot or crew member can, and should, pull the plug when things have the potential to get too dicey. 

Lt. Gonzalez flies with HSL-44 Det 5.