

Situational Awareness

Assertiveness

Decision Making

Communication

Leadership

Adaptability/Flexibility

Mission Analysis

# Crew Resource Every

By LCdr. Tom Long

**W**e make decisions on a daily basis, sometimes without much thought or process.

However, many of the decisions we make while flying can be the difference between life and death.

In over 10 years of military service, I've had two close friends and a handful of other acquaintances and squadronmates killed in naval-aviation mishaps. From day one as an ensign, I was told military flying was a dangerous business, and, throughout my career, I could expect to lose good friends. That prophecy unfortunately has come true.

It's hard to say what the decision process was in the chain of events that led to the deaths of so many good people. I would not even try to recreate their thoughts. I only can go with the facts in the mishap reports and develop my lessons learned. Their flights were all routine missions—if there is such a thing. None were in combat, some were in the training command, and some were in fleet operations. Some were relatively new pilots, several were students, and one just had six months left to finish a 20-year career.

Often times, there is no second chance when things go wrong. Each decision you make affects your life and the lives of others. I've been lucky and have learned skills through experience and



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# Decision Counts

training on how to make better choices. Every situation is different, and the choices are not always black and white. The difference between good and bad decision-making often depends on past experience, and sometimes we're just fortunate.

Using current regulations, NATOPS manuals, instructions, SOPs, and your past experiences and those of your squadronmates, allows you to shift the odds in your favor and increase your rate of success. Through the years, I have made my share of decisions that would fall in the "bad idea, but what does not kill me will only make me better" category. Those free lessons definitely went into my bag-o-experience, and I draw from that experience daily.

Early in my career, as an ensign and newly winged aviator, I was flying with a "seasoned" aircraft commander in a UH-1N around Corpus Christi, Texas. We were low, around 500 feet, and a line of dark clouds was between our destination and us. The aircraft commander saw a hole in the line of darkness and recommended we descend and pick our way through it. However, we couldn't see through the cloud tunnel, nor did we have weather radar. Who knew what towers and obstructions lurked in the distance? If we entered it, there might not be a way out.

As the decision process was ongoing, pictures of a previous UH-1N mishap involving one of the unit's aircraft that had been strewn about the Texas landscape flashed through my head. The safety officer had showed these pictures to me a few weeks earlier.

I told the aircraft commander I was not comfortable with going through the "hole." I preferred to land and wait out the weather or seek an alternative path where we could maintain VFR. The HAC pondered the thought and compromised. We landed at an outlying field and waited for the bad weather to pass. That one decision, made as a crew, could have been the difference between my writing this article today or my parents looking at an old newspaper clipping in scrapbook.

When you are a new pilot, it takes some fortitude and assertiveness to tell a senior aircraft commander, who may not be receptive to inputs from a nugget, you are not comfortable with something he is doing. By now, most of those crusty, pre-CRM autocrats have moved on. Early in your careers, because of a lack of experience and a rookie complex, our initial reaction might be to think an experienced and senior aircraft commander always will make the right decision and will "get us through this."

I can attribute some of my good decision-making to the CRM training I have received. Decision-making is one of the seven critical skills and, when mixed with assertiveness, can make the difference between mission success and making the news in a small column on page three of *USA Today*.

As the saying goes, "There are old pilots, and there are bold pilots, but there are no old, bold pilots." Decision-making and assertiveness are key to successful flying. The cheapest experience is that learned from others' experiences and mistakes.



LCdr. Long flies with VR-53.

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