ORM Corner

I Ain't De-Gossling

By LCdr. Christopher S. Robinson

It was a cool, spring night in late October, and we were operating south of the equator. Four flights were on the schedule, all hot seats, and I was the HAC for the two middle sorties. Our mission was to locate and covertly monitor a fishing vessel suspected of carrying a large amount of contraband.

It was an overcast but moonlit night—good conditions for NVGs. I jumped into the cockpit as the purple guys refueled our SH-60B on the FFG flight deck. I strapped in and got my mind focused. I goggled up and was ready for a long night of flying.

We were only three weeks into a six-month cruise. Before deployment, I had accumulated a grand total of 12 hours of NVG time, the minimum to be qualified. The value of NVGs, as a tactical and safety-of-flight tool, became apparent after using them just those 12 hours. Even with my lack of experience, I found myself saying, "These things make night flying so much easier." I know my fellow LAMPS pilots would agree with me. But, as I found out on this mission, every flight on goggles takes careful planning and consideration.

After launch, we called "ops normal" with about 3+30 on gas. We refined the surface summary developed by the crew before us and correlated the current intelligence with our surface picture to rule out certain tracks from the potential contact of interest. We had been instructed to remain covert, so any visual identification of a contact would be done at a distance where the contact's crew could not see or hear our Seahawk. We estimated this distance to be one mile by flying run-ins on our mother ship and having bridge watchstanders say when they

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Photo by Matthew J. Thomas

heard or saw us. Naturally, we turned off all external lighting.

At one mile, we were able to distinguish gross features on most contacts with the NVGs, but it was not enough to positively identify the bad guy. However, we did narrow the possible suspects to two surface contacts. We continued to monitor them visually and on radar. Toward the end of my first bag of gas, the ASTAC relayed that "Alpha Bravo" had granted permission for us to overtly identify the two contacts of interest. We found our bad guy 15 minutes later. In another 15 minutes, we turned on deck for a hot pump and swap out of my copilot and sensor operator.

We relaunched with instructions to monitor our surface target of interest. As our ship closed the contact's position, we provided information on its course and speed, along with any activity we saw on the weather decks. Once mom was within a couple of miles, she began the query process over bridge-to-bridge radio. We monitored the conversation from the cockpit. During the questioning, we were instructed to get in close and describe any activity.

As we closed to within a couple hundred yards, the contact's forward cargo hold exploded in flames. Seconds later, there were 10 "fishermen" in the water and a 25-man life raft inflating beneath where we began a slow orbit. Within minutes, mom had a RHIB in the water with a rescue crew on board.

For the next 30 minutes, we monitored the situation, passing as much information to combat as we could. As the ship closed the position of the sinking fishing vessel, we marked debris with smoke floats. By the time the 100-foot boat slipped beneath the waves, it was 0300 local time. Moonset was at 0345. Our next recovery cycle was scheduled for 0500. The operating environment was about to change radically.

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Once mom was on scene, the area where the fishing vessel had sunk became awash in white spotlights and other lights. With the RHIB in the water and 10 survivors to worry about, the captain did not want to lose site of anything in the darkness. The moon rapidly vanished. Our nice, high-light evening was turning into an extremely low-light environment, given the thick overcast layer that still existed.

So, there I was, going on my seventh straight hour on goggles. The conditions were low light, with no natural visible horizon off goggles. Home plate floated in a bloom of high-intensity-white spotlights. It was 0445 in the morning, and I had 45 minutes until I was at minimum fuel. The ASTAC told me to come in unaided, since the captain needed to keep the deck and spotlights on.

I thought about my first NVG RAST-landing qualification, when the instructor told me about only the time he had to de-goggle for a shipboard approach. He waved off three times before he finally flew an approach safe enough to transition for landing. I factored in his story with the minimum time I would need to adjust to being off goggles. We were tight on gas.

So, in response to the ASTAC's direction, I politely—well, maybe not so politely—told him, "I ain't de-goggling." I explained why I thought going unaided was a bad idea. He explained the captain's concerns about going dark when he had a boat in the water and a debris field in the general vicinity.

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I held firm, since I believed it was more risky for me to push and do an unaided recovery than for the ship to go lights-out while I landed. I had been on goggles for almost seven hours; the horizon barely was visible when aided. When I looked under my goggles, all I saw was blackness and no horizon. As a result, I thought I would need 20 to 30 minutes to adjust to the unaided environment. The captain agreed, and 10 minutes later, we made an uneventful NVG-aided landing and passed the aircraft to the next crew.

I debriefed in the combat information center and spoke to the captain about what had happened on the last recovery. During this conversation, I realized I had not told him of several procedures for NVG operations, such as the minimum time needed to transition from goggles to unaided. If I had thought through the mission more carefully, I would have realized that during counter-drug operations, a ship can go from running dark and being covert to shining spotlights while doing small-boat operations and conducting a rescue in the space of several minutes. The former mode of operation is ideal for NVGs, while the latter favors unaided operations.

From an ORM perspective, I looked at this mission as an example of the relationship that exists between applying ORM during planning and applying it during real-time decision-making, or "ORM on the fly." At the end of the mission, my crew and I decided de-goggling for the next recovery would add too much risk. We would not be acclimated to unaided flight before we put ourselves in a low-fuel situation. This was a good decision, based on "ORM on the fly." However, if we had been more detailed during preflight risk assessment and taken a broader look at the mission—not just the aircraft and crew—we may have decided a high probability existed for night small-boat operations. We would have discussed the issue of de-goggling.

The captain was forced to go lights out and temporarily lose visual contact with his RHIB, an uncomfortable situation under the circumstances, because we were not prepared to fly unaided. Poor risk management during planning forced my crew to apply "real time" ORM.

We must strive to include all players in the ORM process, especially when flying around the boat. Every evolution on board a ship, from engineering drills to small-boat operations to tactical maneuvering, adds risk to flight operations. The more inclusive we make the ORM process, the more effective it will be.

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