Well-Planned Swim

Offers Respite From 54 Days

By JO1(SW) Crystal M. Raner,
USS Wasp *(LHD 1)*

How do you break the tedium of almost two months at sea? For USS *Wasp* (LHD 1) Sailors and Marines, it was a meticulously-planned, MWR-sponsored event that lasted for four hours. The ship's crew had the opportunity to cool off in the waters of the 5th Fleet operating area. Those seeking more of a challenge were able to jump 32 feet from the amphibious ship's deck-edge aircraft elevators.

"Many concerns need to be addressed when you plan any event for a crew of 3,000 Sailors and Marines," said LCdr. Robert Walker, the ship's assistant operations officer. "Personnel served as crowd control, safety monitors and rigid-hull inflatable-boat crews, staffed with rescue swimmers. These details required days of planning."

"*Wasp* leadership wanted to ensure that all safety considerations had been addressed," said Walker. "Numerous hazards are involved in swimming in the open ocean, particularly when you are entering the ocean from a 44,000-ton ship. We had to make sure all people entering the water could do so safely. Slipping on the stern gate, improperly jumping from the elevator, tiring during swimming, and potentially-dangerous marine life were just a few considerations we needed to work out to provide the crew a safe and fun environment in which to swim."

Rescue swimmer and ABH3(AW) Jesse Kennett kept watch from a RHIB as his shipmates entered the crystal-blue water. "I would much rather rescue someone under conditions like these, rather than during a man overboard," he said. "Whether a shipmate accidentally falls overboard or at a swim call, you have to stay focused. During the swim call, I felt more like a lifeguard. It was a much better feeling than when you know a shipmate is in danger and you have to hurry up and find him."

Ltjg. Christa Brown, ship's fire control officer, recalled a jump she had made during her Naval Academy days. "At the Naval Academy, part of our training included jumping from a 10-meter tower," she said. "We would stand up on the ledge and look across the room at a huge national ensign. Then we would look down and there would be this tiny pool of water. Jumping from the aircraft elevator reminded me of skydiving."

The safest way to jump into a body of water is feet-first and with arms crossed. All jumpers tried to maintain this position, and after landing in the water, they immediately got out of the area and swam or dog-paddled their way to a line tied to the ship's accommodation ladder.

For AO3(AW) Brandon Uher, the swim call was his first during his three years onboard *Wasp.* A shipmate convinced him to jump from the elevator with him. "Swimming in the marked-off area around the stern gate was great. It felt good to be off the ship," said Uher. "The wait in line for the aircraft elevator jump was long, but when we finally got a chance to free fall, it was a blast."

Even though it took most of the day to get *Wasp's* 3,000 Sailors and Marines in and out of the water, it was well worth the planning. After all, an opportunity like this may only come along once in a lifetime.

n Call at Sea

Sailors aboard USS *Wasp* jump from a deck-edge elevator during a rare swim call while on deployment. Before allowing this thrilling plunge, shipboard leaders used ORM. They did extensive research, had discussions and planned how to control risks during the swim call. Note that these Sailors are using the only acceptable jumping position, which would be used when abandoning ship. Other restrictions also applied, and the jumps were closely monitored by safety personnel.

Navy photo by PH1(AW) Alan Warner

Editor's note: Fathom *asked USS* Wasp's *Safety Officer, LCdr. Michael J. Ohlhaver, how the ship prepared for the swim call, along with other questions about the event. Readers will note* Wasp *planned for its swim call as it would for any operational exercise and used operational risk management when doing so.*

What instructions or existing Navy protocol was used to assure all hands' safety during the event?

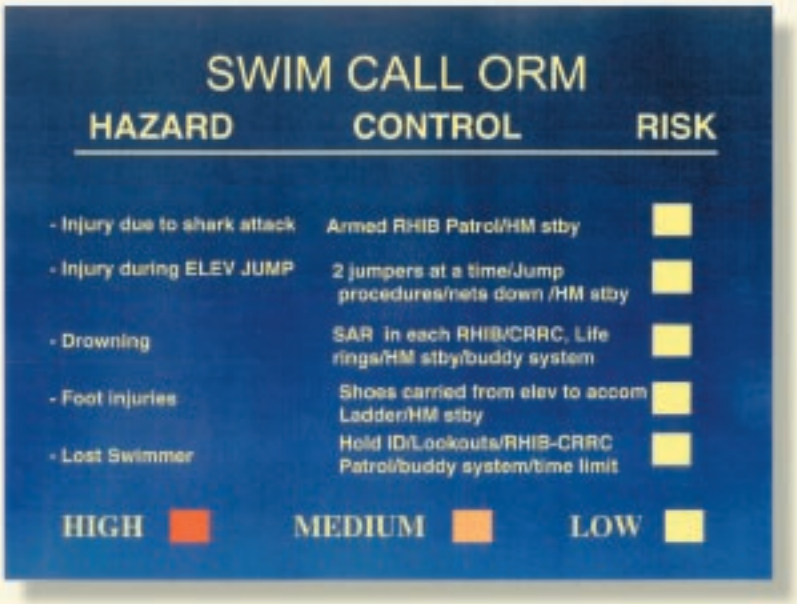
We relied heavily on OpNavInst. 3500.39A, Operational Risk Management. We also researched and observed local water and weather conditions. Thorough Marine Corps-style mission-planning and briefings made sure the event was well-coordinated.

What specific hazard issues were addressed and how did *Wasp* avoid mishaps or injuries?

The major concerns included injury during the elevator jump, foot injuries while in transit aboard the ship to get to the swim-call area, shark-attacks or other potential marine-life injuries, ingress, egress, drowning, lost swimmers, sea condition, winds, shipping traffic, ship discharges, and ship control. At any given time, more supervisors, life guards, SAR swimmers, and divers were monitoring the activities—both on the ship and in six small boats—than there were swimmers. Elevator jumpers entered the water only two at a time and, also, only after being briefed on body position for water entry. Jumpers had to double-check to make sure the water below the elevator was clear. Paired crew members could not jump until the previous pair had surfaced and reached a tending line leading to the accommodation ladder. In the stern swimming area, swimmers were divided into groups of 20, with each group allowed eight minutes in the water.

Sailors and Marines enjoy swimming off the ship's stern gate during a recent swim call held by the Norfolk-based USS *Wasp*. Operational risk management was used to plan the event, which took place without incident or injury.

Navy photo by FN Stephen Grubb



SWIM CALL ORM

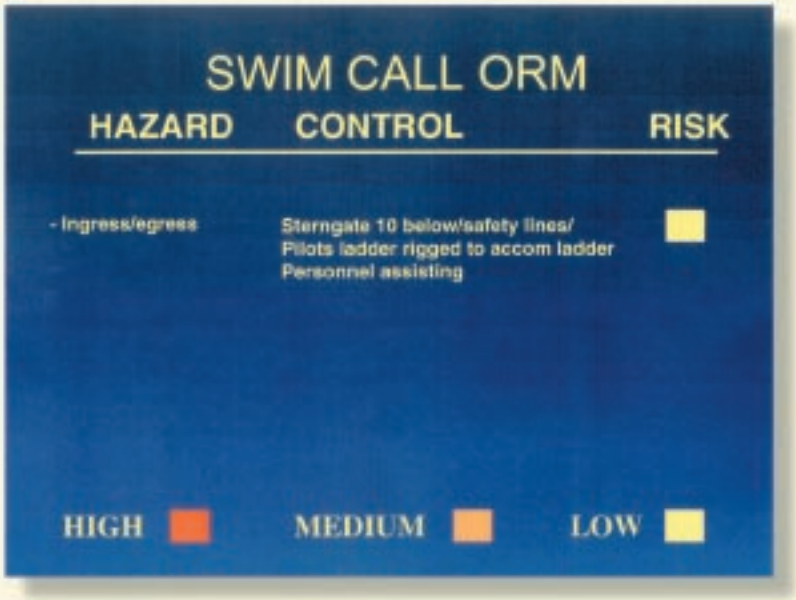
HAZARD	CONTROL	RISK
- Injury due to shark attack	Armed RHIB Patrol/HM stby	
- Injury during ELEV JUMP	2 jumpers at a time/Jump procedures/nets down /HM stby	
- Drowning	SAR in each RHIB/CRRC, Life rings/HM stby/buddy system	
- Foot injuries	Shoes carried from elev to accom Ladder/HM stby	
- Lost Swimmer	Hold ID/Lookouts/RHIB-CRRC Patrol/buddy system/time limit	

HIGH MEDIUM LOW

SWIM CALL ORM

HAZARD	CONTROL	RISK
- Heavy Seas	No Go if > 2 FT Seas	
- High Winds	No go if > 15 kts wind	
- Shipping traffic	Swim area out of traffic Lanes/ Clear swim area if contact with <6,000 CPA	
- Ship discharges	Secure CHT/Scullery/environmental Discharges during swim call	
- Ship control	WASP DIW/ Spin shafts (7-10RPM) /No swimmers below stern gate/no Rudder use	

HIGH MEDIUM LOW



SWIM CALL ORM

HAZARD	CONTROL	RISK
- Ingress/egress	Sterngate 10 below/safety lines/ Pilots ladder rigged to accom ladder Personnel assisting	

HIGH MEDIUM LOW

Although eight minutes sounds like a short time, most swimmers found it was long enough to enjoy the water without exhausting themselves. Again, tending lines leading to the stern were available if people tired from swimming or treading water. Here, too, the next group was not allowed in the water until all swimmers from the previous group were accounted for. Participants gave their ID cards to a master-at-arms before entering the water and collected the cards when they came back aboard.

Was the CO reluctant to approve a swim call?

The captain was enthusiastic about the idea, provided all risks were mitigated to his satisfaction and that of the embarked Marine expeditionary-unit commander. In the end, the captain and the embarked amphibious-squadron commander willingly participated in the swim call.

Did any *Wasp* Sailors or Marines get injured during the swim call?

No.

What was the temperature of the water?

The water was 84 degrees Fahrenheit.

For More Info. . .

Refer to para 510.60 in OpNavInst. 3120.32C, Standard Organization and Regulations of the U.S. Navy, which lists specific requirements for a swim call.