

Where'd the Boat Go?

By Ltjg. Steve Audelo

If you have been off the Virginia Capes operating area in January, then you know how bad the fog can get. I'm talking fog so thick you can cut it. That's exactly the kind of weather we experienced during a JTFX.

The night before our fateful flight, the other crew on our detachment diverted because of poor weather. After shooting two emergency-low-visibility approaches (ELVAs), they had called it quits and flown to another ship in our group, which had reported better ceilings and visibility.

We launched on an SSC mission, returned to mom following the first bag, hot pumped, and relaunched to provide range clearance for our ship's missile shoot.

After the shoot, we were vectored south to search for an "enemy submarine" suspected to be in the area. During the range clearance, we spotted some nasty fog that appeared to be heading our way. However, the tasking we received took mom and us away from it.

Even though we wouldn't be in range of a shore divert, we also had USS *Seattle* (AOE 3), an FFG, and an LST (not part of our group) for possible divert options. Looking at our gas quantity, the progression of the fog, and the direction of our tasking, we were confident we easily could do the bidding of our warfare commander and return home with plenty of fuel.

Once we arrived at DATUM, it was easy to find the sub: It had surfaced. We called a visual on the sub and zoomed in for a photo rig. We marked-on-top a couple of times and reported course and speed before the sub did a 180 and increased speed. Our ship tasked us to stay on

top the contact and to update course and speed changes. We continued the updates until the submarine disappeared into the heavy fog bank we had been monitoring all morning.

Not seeing the FLIR turret on the nose of the helo convinced us to break contact and to head to the boat. Heading back was a good idea in theory but not in practice. The fog that had been hugging the coast during our "hunt" had begun to move between our ship and us.

At the time we called lost contact on the sub and let the controller know we wanted to RTB because of deteriorating weather, the now fast-moving fog bank had overtaken our ship. Our predicament found us 40 miles from mom, separated by a fog bank in zero-zero conditions. We asked, via our ASTAC, if mom would close our position and try to find better visibility for our recovery. This request never was passed on to the TAO, who wasn't aware of our situation until the only reference the ship had to our position was an old DATUM. The ship no longer had a solid track on us.

Our situation worsened. The radios started to break up, and we lost HAWK, our encrypted data link. We couldn't locate mom's position on radar because of interference from the fog. We checked our gas and calculated we had one hour before we went swimming. Normally, that amount of time would be a comfort.

The fog was moving east, toward us, but at a rate that mom wouldn't be able to get ahead of in time for us to land. A mere 40 miles separated our comfortable racks from us, but there wasn't any way for us to get to them.

The HAC kept talking to the ASTAC, providing him with our location and inten-

tions. Meanwhile, the sensor operator and I tried to locate *Seattle*, which was nearby and our intended divert. As we turned toward *Seattle*'s last known position, I tried raising them on their land-launch frequency. As we rolled out on a heading toward them, the same fog bank overtook the ship. This day easily and quickly had become my worst fear.

We knew an FFG and an LST still were in the area, but we weren't sure if the fog also had swallowed them up. While the HAC communi-

We circled the ship and had our aircrewman signal we needed to land. Then we saw an amazing sight: The entire crew was scrambling to set flight quarters. A figure stepped out onto the bridge wing and enthusiastically waved us aft to land—that figure was the XO.

The day could have ended very badly. Only two minutes after we touched down on deck, the same fog bank overtook the ship. The *Tortuga* had been our last chance at landing; after that, we would have had to ditch.

We checked our gas and calculated we had one hour before we went swimming.



Photo composite.

cated with mom, still trying to relay our intentions and position, the sensor operator and I tried to visually, and with FLIR, find the other ships.

After what seemed like an eternity, the sensor operator spotted on FLIR what looked like a warship. The contact was USS *Tortuga* (LSD 46), which had an ample flight deck. As the HAC closed their position, I tried calling them to explain our situation and to request permission to land. We couldn't establish communications, but we continued to make calls in the blind. We later found out they had heard everything we had said but couldn't broadcast to us because of radio problems.

Many factors led to this near-mishap. While crew coordination was amazing inside the cockpit, the communication flow outside, back to our ship, could have been better. Granted, we were having problems with the radios at just the wrong time, but we could have done things differently to make our plight more known: We could have spoken directly with the TAO as soon as we thought the gravity of our situation wasn't understood.

Communication can be the vital thing that will keep you out of the water. 🦅

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