

# Fair Winds and Foll

**W**e bid shipmates farewell with this naval “blessing” because it represents the ideal underway conditions for which Sailors yearn. It was that kind of day when we recently unloaded a Marine Expeditionary Unit, then got underway for an amphibious exercise—all in near-perfect weather.

However, we quickly discovered winds are not always fair, and the seas often crash against the ship as she plows through ocean waters. Such was the sea state on the fourth day of the amphibious exercise. Flight-deck conditions were particularly hazardous, with the wind continuously blowing across the deck at 35 knots, and rough seas rocked the ship more than that to which her crew was accustomed aboard an LHD. Had we respected this hazardous environment and used operational risk management, we could have prevented what was a near-tragic mishap.

Here’s what happened.

An AH-1W Super Cobra helicopter was secured on Spot 4 and tightly chained to the flight deck. The next step for preparing the aircraft for flight-deck stowage was aligning the main-rotor blades fore and aft along the fuselage. Coordination between two people was required to align the Cobra’s tail-rotor blades alongside the tail pylon, while positioning the main-rotor blades. The plane captain soon would learn a valuable lesson about working with rotor blades on a windy flight deck in rough seas.

Meanwhile, primary flight control had announced over the flight-deck 5MC public-address system for all flight-deck hands to prepare for a turn to starboard. The combination of high winds, rough seas, changing course, and a temperamental rotor brake proved too much for the lone Cobra plane captain as he struggled with the main-rotor



# owing Seas...

blades; they were intent on doing what they do best when faced in high winds: fly!

The plane captain soon also realized he was losing this battle and let go of the retaining line he was using to move the main-rotor blades. This line was pulling him along the flight deck toward the deck-edge catwalk.

After other flight-deck shipmates realized his predicament and came to help, the plane captain regained control of the main-rotor blades and positioned and secured them without any more problems.

We often fall prey to a false sense of comfort when we repeatedly do certain work. That comfort robs us of our situational awareness and sets us up for a mishap if we ignore ORM principles. In this situation, 35-knot winds across the flight deck became our wakeup call. Although the plane captain followed procedures while securing the main-

rotor blades, he and other flight-deck personnel failed to consider the high-winds hazard during what had become a comfortable and routine evolution. They should have realized the adverse flight-deck conditions required two people to secure the helo for flight-deck stowage.

If shipmates initially had helped the plane captain position the rotor blades, he probably would

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not have been overwhelmed by the wind whipping up those blades. Flapping rotor blades on a pitching, wind-swept flight deck is never good; yet, we were spared a serious mishap. The only “injury” suffered during this situation was a bruised ego. The MEU rotary-wing assistant safety officer and squadron members have incorporated this lesson into their standard operating procedures for foul-weather operations.

Mother Nature is powerful, and on the high seas, it is particularly important that you respect her. ORM helps Sailors maintain that respect, which in turn gives them the situational awareness not to fall victim to Mother Nature’s power.

Sailors must use ORM during all evolutions, no matter how routine they seemingly have become. No specific job is ever done exactly as was done previously. ORM helps workers identify potential problems before they occur. It also restores situational awareness. ☺

