

Teaching New Tricks

By LCdr. Mike Rayfield

I was scheduled as the mission commander for a double-cycle flight in our trusty Hummer, early in our WestPac cruise. The mission for both cycles was to QA other air controllers in the battle group during an air defense exercise. The unbriefed mission, as I understood it, was to get a trap-cat-trap (TCT) to keep our pilot and copilot current. I would be sitting in the radar officer seat, evaluating our potential combat information center officer as he finished the final



Old Dogs

stages of qualification for mission commander. The air control officer was a designated mission commander with cruise experience. A senior department head sat in the pilot seat, and he had a nugget copilot.

During preflight, the pilot noticed one of our out-board-rudder caps had a ding in it, which obviously came from one of the bomb racks stacked in the Hummer hole. After downing the aircraft, we received word from our flight-deck coordinator (FDC) of a comer aircraft that would be ready in 10 to 15 minutes. The crew walked to the other aircraft and hung out near the main entrance hatch to the Hawkeye, waiting the much anticipated “thumbs up” from our FDC. As the maintenance officer, I knew the AE working on this downing discrepancy was the best man for the job, and if it could be fixed, this Sailor was the one to fix it. After a few minutes, my fellow department head said we would not make this launch, and we should have the duty office slide our event. We also let our troopers know so there was no unneeded pressure to make the launch. Meanwhile, the rudder cap from our original bird had been replaced, and the plane was up.

The crew preflighted and began getting ready for engine starts. Once the engines were online, we were told to shut down because our flight had been cancelled. As the engines were put into low-speed ground idle, we got word we were not cancelled but would be launching on the next go in one hour. In addition, my ACO's ICS was inop, so I kicked him out of the aircraft because of safety of flight. I didn't want any crew member who could not talk on ICS to go flying. At this point, my PCICO spoke up and said he didn't feel comfortable with the aircraft switches, the aircrew musical chairs, and the whole evolution, and he recommended we not go fly. I knew we were within SOP for a maximum of three man-ups and I also knew the real reason for going flying, so I disagreed with his recommendation and conferred with the plane commander. The pilot and copilot agreed we were not in an unsafe situation and recommended we continue and get airborne. As the mission commander, it was my obligation to get to the real reason why this PCICO did not want to go flying, or at least address the situation and get him on my side. Right? Wrong. It was

my duty to get his input on why he didn't want to go flying, but there was no way I was going to get him in a comfort zone that would get rid of his objections. In my 14 years in the Navy, I never have encountered a situation where everyone except one crew member feels safe to go flying. I offered the option of the PCICO getting out of the aircraft, with me remaining in the back as the mission commander. This was perfectly legal, and because our goal was a TCT, I thought it perfectly reasonable. The PCICO pointed out he should not be put on the spot to get out of the aircraft and not be a team player, and that, maybe as the maintenance officer, I had a special interest in not wanting to bust a sortie. The PCICO decided to stay, and we got airborne.

After these events, I reevaluated what I had done as a mission commander to let this happen and how I could prevent it from recurring. I was to blame for not explicitly spelling out the reason for the flight and explaining more thoroughly our go or no-go criteria. Since I never had faced this dilemma, there was no need to brief it in the crew coordination and ORM portion.

At what point does the decision to fly in a multi-seat aircraft become a democratic one and not one by the mission commander or plane commander? Does one crew member have veto power? From my experiences, the decision rests on the plane commander for any aircraft and safety-of-flight-related issues and with the mission commander for any weapon-systems problems. A dialogue between these people should solve any problems that arise. Although this was briefed and a good working relationship between the pilot and mission commander was established, it did not help solve this incident. Sometimes old dogs do learn new tricks.

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