

In the Viking community, aircrews brief SAR responsibilities in the event we are needed as on-scene commander. We normally think about being involved in a SAR at sea. A SAR over land and within 50 miles of home base was one of those occurrences that I didn't start thinking about until it happened.

One late afternoon, I was added as the mission commander for a bombing flight. We were headed to Townsend Range to drop some Mk-76 blue death. I was teamed up with one of the new-guy pilots for a front-seats-only hop.

After about a 20-minute AIRNAV to the range, we canceled IFR, checked in, and proceeded to drop at will. Halfway down the chute on our third, high-angle, dive pass, we heard a "Mayday" call

over guard. At first, I wasn't sure exactly what had been said during the Mayday transmission. The fact that we were in hot added to the confusion.

Pulling off the target, the pilot and I looked at each other and asked in unison, "Was that a Mayday call?" The next transmission on the target frequency was from the target control: "Mauler, did you just hear a Mayday call from a Bourbon flight?" It seemed as though nobody was quite sure who had called or what the problem was.

We switched up 243.0 and got in touch with the Mayday aircraft. It was an A-10 about 20 miles southwest of the target. His wingman had just ejected. Now the wheels started turning in my head, and I realized what our contribution was going to be in this SAR. I was a senior JO NFO in

Photo-composite by Allan Amen

Did You Hear

"Mayday"?

by LCdr. Ron Novak



the squadron, and I had dealt with a couple at-sea SAR efforts. My first thought was that a 15-plane gaggle would be speeding to the downed aircrew, all trying to do the same job. My pilot, with just a few months in the squadron, must have told me three or four times, “We need to get down there!” while I clarified a couple of details with an ATC controller.

On our way to the SAR, we set a bingo fuel. I switched up 282.8 and just listened for the first minute. After we determined the downed pilot and the wingman were in good comms with each other, we checked in with the wingman (the primary SAR) and told him we were an S-3B with about three hours’ time on station. He told us to hold five miles south of his location and relay comms as necessary. That reinforced my belief that there was a convention of aircraft around the SAR location. So I asked the wingman, “How many other SAR aircraft on scene?”

“You are it, besides me,” he replied.

Townsend Target called on the radio and asked us the status, because they needed to send a crash crew and firefighters to contain the area. Fortunately, we were still within communication range of the target; the A-10 wingman was too low to receive their transmissions. By that time, the downed pilot had managed to find his way out of the woods away from the burning wreckage of what used to be an A-10. He stumbled upon a mobile home, knocked on the door, and asked the resident for a ride to the hospital. Several rescue vehicles were within two miles of the pilot’s location, but none could find their way through the thick woods where the wreckage was spread out. At about the same time, the wingman A-10 called us and said he was at bingo and on his way home. “You guys can assume primary SAR—see ya,” he said, before switching.

It was our show now, so we drove into the crash site at 200 feet to see for ourselves. The afternoon had been hazy, and just as we started to focus on the smoke plume, we also noticed two towers in the area (the A-10 wingman had warned us about them). Surprise! There were actually three, and all were more than 1,000 feet. As we maneuvered between the sets of towers, we received a faint radio call from the Townsend

ground crew, who were on their way down the interstate about 20 miles northeast of the crash site. The ground crew was looking for directions to the crash, and, again, the pilot and I looked at each other and shrugged. Neither of us was familiar with this part of the countryside. When the ground crew vehicles were within four miles, we started pointing out topographic features to give them directions. The problem was that we couldn’t see the vehicles. Even at 200 feet, it was extremely hard to make them out. Most of the roads were dirt and lined with trees.

Finally, we managed to make visual contact with the Air Force ground-crew vehicles. We could only figure out one way to send them in the right direction: We had to fly straight down their path on top of them and then find the next accessible dirt road. A couple of transmissions made me feel like a gas-station attendant giving directions. “OK,” I’d say, “turn left now and then make a right about 200 yards down.” We ended up guiding the entire Air Force crash crew, local firefighting crews, sheriff patrols, and a SAR helo to pick up the survivor (the helo wasn’t needed since the pilot had hitched a ride to the hospital). It was essential to get all crash vehicles in quickly, however, because the fire was spreading through the forest. We remained in comms with the Air Force ground crew, relaying that we would remain overhead to assist. When the crash site was contained, the ground crew thanked us for our help, and we returned to base.

I remember my apprehension of a “furball” SAR effort. I assumed that every aircraft known to mankind would be showing up. I applauded my pilot’s initiative to get involved immediately (but not blindly)—it is the right attitude when a SAR mission broadsides you in the middle of your regular mission. You may be the only other aircraft in the area, and your reaction time could make the difference to someone in the water or on the ground.

I was surprised with the assistance we had been able to provide. I never expected to be directing a firefighting effort from overhead as an S-3B crew. When I visualized an in-close SAR effort, I expected only helo assets to provide capable support, but they weren’t handy, and we were. 

LCdr. Novak flies with VS-22.