

Ready *for* Anything

By Lt. Ghislaine Stonaker

Have you ever heard the expression, “You have to be ready for anything, all the time”? Have you ever had a flight that wasn’t anything like you had anticipated or briefed?

I had one of those flights. I no longer take anything for granted, and I try to be ready for anything.

I was underway for the first time in my naval-aviation career, on a *Spruance*-class destroyer, as a helicopter second pilot on an SH-60B. We completed week-one work-ups, and returned to Norfolk to brief for an exercise: a combined sinkex off the Virginia coast.

Many assets would be involved in the exercise, including U.S. and U.K. ships, submarines, and multiple aircraft. The exercise would be a great opportunity for our detachment because we were scheduled to shoot a Penguin missile—a rare opportunity for LAMPS. We also would provide range-clearance services and would drop sonobouys for battle-damage assessment (BDA).

My OinC and I had prepared for months for the missile shoot. We were to simultaneously launch a Penguin with an aircraft from another detachment. Back in Mayport, the crews had practiced the shoot together. The scenario had been well thought out and practiced many times. We were prepared for all the problems associated with the missile and its systems, and we felt ready. However, we had no idea what was in store for us.

Our crew—the OinC (the PNAC), two aircrewmembers, and myself (the PAC)—were up early for a 0300 brief and 0500 takeoff. The mission of our first bag was to make sure the range, which only was a few miles away from most of the involved ships, was clear of all surface contacts and marine life. The targets were the decommissioned *Wainwright* and two old berthing barges. The first shots of the exercise had been fired the previous day, and we provided FLIR and visual BDA. Our final check made sure the range was clear of all marine mammals and range foulers.

We headed back to mom for a hot pump. After refueling, we took off, completed our after-takeoff checks, and started the missile-firing checklist.

The first shooter of the day, a British Lynx helicopter, was finishing on the range; we were scheduled second. We listened to their calls over the radio, and they had a successful shoot. Our time quickly was approaching, and we felt ready to go.

While orbiting south of our ingress point, we heard over the radio, “Mayday. Mayday. Hotel Zulu, this is Kingfisher. Dual-engine failure. Going in!”

It was 0740. The boss and I gave each other a look I never will forget, and, at the same time, I started to turn the helo 180 degrees away from the range. He made sure the missile was safed. The range controller gave us the last known range and bearing of Kingfisher from our position, and I rolled out as directed on a heading of 210

degrees. The weather was marginal, with lots of haze, but I saw a spot on the water that was different from the rest. I told the crew what I saw, never took my eyes off it, and headed straight for the spot. By this time, the PNAC had broken out the SAR-briefing checklist, and, in a matter of seconds, our mission had changed.

Our crewmen in the back had no rescue-swimmer gear because we already were weight-limited because of the missile, buoys, and a crew of four. However, we did have the rescue strop, and we were standing by with the rescue hoist. As we got closer to the spot, I descended, and we saw an oil slick and debris coming to the surface. A few seconds later, boss and I saw something orange in the water. As we approached, we could tell it was the reflective piece of a survival vest, and, in the vest, was a survivor.

I brought the helo down to 80 feet, and the boss engaged the automatic hover. It was 0748. He turned off my radios, and he did all the external talking.

I listened to my aircrewman as he conned me over the survivor, “Easy right, easy forward, on top, hoist going down, survivor swimming over, survivor wrapping strop around himself, survivor giving thumbs up, hoist coming up, survivor clear of water, survivor halfway up, survivor approaching cabin door, survivor in helo, cabin door closed, clear for forward flight.” The time was 0753.

I hit the auto depart twice for a manual departure and received vectors to a British frigate, which was the downed Lynx’s own ship. She had been closing

our position since the first distress call. We checked in with the frigate, made sure her winds were within our approach envelope, and landed at 0757. They had a medical officer standing by to assist with the survivor. After the survivor was escorted out of the helo, we were on our way.

We made our call to the controller on the frigate at 0800, “Ops normal, four souls on board, 2+45.”

The elapsed time from the Mayday call to taking off from the British ship only was 20 minutes but 20 minutes we never will forget. Never in a million years did we think we would be performing a search and rescue when we briefed earlier that morning; although, as always, it was covered as a contingency plan in our NATOPS brief. All we could think about was being the first crew in over six years to successfully shoot a Penguin missile on the East Coast.

We were prepared for anything, and, because of that, we saved the life of a British sailor. Once the SAR effort was complete, and the sinkex had resumed, our crew day had expired. Another crew from our detachment jumped in and successfully shot the missile. Even though they were the backup crew, they prepared as if they were going to take the shot. They started their day anticipating watching our shot from CIC but wound up strapping in and performing a flawless mission. Are you ready for anything? 🇺🇸

Lt. Stonaker flies with HSL-44 Det 1.



Photo by PH3 Alex C. Witte. Modified.