

What—No

By LCdr. Sterling Dawley

Liberty had expired at 0600 for all hands, and the navigation brief was scheduled for 0715. USS *O’Kane* (DDG 77) prepared to leave its last liberty port at the end of a highly successful WestPac cruise, which had also been the destroyer’s maiden deployment. The crew was excited since, a few days earlier, the ship had completed what was thought to have been its last major hurdle: the day-long transit through the Great Barrier Reef. The navigation team had performed brilliantly, and the bridge watch-team had been flawless. All that remained between the crew and its reunion with family and friends in *O’Kane*’s homeport was a relatively easy sea-and-anchor detail to navigate the ship out of a foreign port.

Having looked ahead to see what Fleet Exercise Publication (FXP) events would expire within the next few months, the ship noticed the duty section had not gotten it underway for almost a year. Testing the duty section’s proficiency for getting *O’Kane* underway was an annual requirement, so the ship decided to have the duty section put to sea from this port. The ship would have to maintain this readiness after returning home and during its post-deployment stand-down period, so why not now identify watchbill shortfalls or critical watch-station discrepancies and correct them before returning home?

The crew used operational risk management to assess risks for the sea-and-anchor detail. Duty section one was chosen to get the ship underway, since it was determined to be best prepared to do so.

Duty section one then wrote the watchbill, practiced manning stations, tested communication circuits, and made necessary adjustments during



their last duty day before getting underway. Also, the regular sea-and-anchor watchstanders who were not in section one stood by as safety observers when we left port, should an emergency arise. We had the navigation brief at 0715 on the day of departure, and, during the brief, the duty section reviewed risk factors and risk-control methods.

Worries?



The drill paid dividends in many ways. Despite a lengthy navigation-and-operations brief and the sea-and-anchor detail being called away five minutes late, the crew still managed to man all stations on time. Restricted maneuvering was set, the harbor pilot was aboard, and all lines were singled by 0820—10 minutes ahead of schedule. The

pilot briefed the captain, conning officer, and the officer-of-the-deck on the getting-underway plan. All watch stations were also briefed. Two watch-station manning discrepancies were identified and quickly filled by qualified personnel.

When compared to sea-and-anchor details from past months, this evolution seemed simple. After leaving the pier, the ship would make a 30-degree course change inside the harbor and turn into the channel, with an after-range as a guide. The remainder of the channel consisted of only one more, 10-degree course change, which again had an after-range as a guide.

With *O’Kane* free of the pier, the pilot recommended increasing speed. Although this recommendation differed from the original plan, all concerned felt comfortable with the speed increase. As the ship neared the channel, the conning officer—with the captain’s and pilot’s concurrences—ordered, “Right 10 degrees rudder.” The pilot, though, felt the turn was not quick enough and recommended increasing the rudder to right 20 degrees. The conning officer executed the order and gave a steadying course that coincided with the charted course.

As the ship steadied, the captain, OOD, and the pilot all realized the ship was going to be right of track. The pilot told the conning officer to shift his rudder—the conning officer gave the order, but neither the helmsman nor helm-

safety officer heard his command. As anxiety increased due to the relatively narrow channel and a slim margin for error, the pilot—standing between the conning officer and the helmsman—turned and ordered the helmsman, “Port twenty.”

Unfamiliar with the command and realizing he should not take an order from the pilot, the

helmsman waited for the conning officer to give the order. The conn gave the command, “Left 20 degrees rudder,” at the same time the pilot reiterated his order. The order then was executed, and the ship regained track. The entire course of events took place within 30 seconds, and, although the ship quickly recovered, tensions remained high on the bridge. The remainder of the evolution went smoothly, except for one improper repeat back from the helmsman, who had been rattled by the events.

From an outsider’s view, it would be easy to read this and think, “They obviously had an inexperienced team on the bridge.” Such definitely was not the case. The bridge team was well-seasoned, and the helmsman, in particular, had been performing as master helmsman for most of the deployment.

In an effort to learn from its mistakes, the ship dissected the chain of events during the next day’s operations brief. Much was learned from this near-mishap:

- First, take a hard look at when liberty should expire in relation to when the ship will be leaving port.
- Allow enough time to complete muster and to evaluate the crew’s physical and mental states of readiness. In talking to the master helmsman after the detail, it was learned he had picked up a virus that had been circulating among the crew. He physically did not feel up to standing his watch, but he felt the duty section was relying on him, and he did not know whom to ask to be replaced.
- Stay focused and prioritize the discussion of events. The navigation and operations brief took longer than expected. Instead of focusing on navigation, the ship discussed the entire day’s events, including a Pre-action Calibration (PAC) fire scheduled for the afternoon. Since the brief ran long, the duty section felt rushed in getting to its sea-detail stations. Consequently, they might not have evaluated each watchstander’s physical and mental state as closely as they should have.
- Another point discussed was over-dependence on harbor pilots—all too often we put our complete trust in them. In many cases, especially overseas, we overlook the fact that a pilot may have limited, if any, experience conning a particular

class or type of ship. The crew members must remember it is their responsibility to know better than anyone their ship’s specific handling characteristics. When they recognize a pilot as being unfamiliar with their class or type of ship, they must seize the initiative and make recommendations.

- Be cautious of a shift-your-rudder order. If the helmsman already has started to steady on the ordered course, a shift-rudder order might not have the desired effect.
- Ensure the bridge stays quiet, and ask extra personnel to leave. If we had done these two things, we may have avoided an order being missed or not heard. If the helmsman does not answer up for an order, repeat the order and make sure it’s acknowledged.

In this case, it also was apparent the harbor pilot was unfamiliar with a twin-screw ship being able to quickly come up to speed and having a relatively tight turning radius. The order for right 20 degrees rudder was excessive at 12 knots, and the bridge team should have recognized that error. A pilot having resident knowledge of his port does not relieve the bridge team of its responsibility to know the waters the ship is transiting.

More attention also should have been given to how narrow the harbor entrance and channel really were. Although *O’Kane* had an excellent navigation team, we must remember every fix is historical data. Any bridge team always should shoot a bearing to match any steadying course—this helps to make sure the ship is coming to a desired heading.

In summary, each of these factors contributed to our brief situation on the bridge during our transit out the channel. The key item we took away was that even the seemingly easiest of sea-and-anchor-details quickly can go awry, with potentially tragic results. Do not let a history of past achievements and successes numb your attention to the situation at hand or to the performance of your watchstanders.

Never forget you are not home until the last mooring line is doubled. ☸

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