â€œSir, Would You Like to Conn the Ship?â€•

Description

I have mentioned in other posts one of the jobs I had was conducting inspections of surface ship in the Atlantic Fleet for combat systems readiness. The inspection was called the Combat Systems Assessment (CSA), and during my three years of doing this, it was done under two different procedures. Thatâ€™s not important right now, but fodder for more sea stories.

Near the end of my 3 year â€œshore dutyâ€• (oh, yeah, thatâ€™s the one where youâ€™re supposed to be home) tour, the people over at Naval Surface Forces, Atlantic (NAVSURFLANT) decided we also needed to do CSAs on the patrol hydrofoils. They hadnâ€™t been given this level of scrutiny, so we pulled checksheets for their systems and programs, assembled a smaller team (myself and 4 others) and scheduled an airlift to Key West from Norfolk. Darn the bad luck the Naval Air Logistics Office (NALO) â€œgaveâ€• my team and I the â€œStation Planeâ€• from Chambers Field (NAS Norfolk). The station planes are like the assigned vehicle for the NAS commander. It was a C-12, in military terms, but, in the civilian world (and most especially in the skydiving realm) itâ€™s just that wonderful Beechcraft King Air airframe. Read twin turboprop executive planeâ€¦:)

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Anyhow, we went to NAS Key West and then aboard the USS HERCULES (PHM-2). She was one of 6 ships of the PEGASUS Class of hydrofoils. 42 kts while â€œflying,â€• and armed with a 76mm gun, and 4 Harpoon anti-ship missiles.

We did our thing, checking the checklists, then watching the crew do a practice engagement. Once this all was completed, the CO, a LCDR (O-4) had the Officer of the Deck â€œlandâ€• the ship in the emergency mode, which was a tactic to run fast on the foils, get into a bunch of ships like a fishing fleet, then slam the ship down on the hull and magically look like the fishing boats around you on radar. The passed the word for all hands to brace for an â€œemergency landing,â€• and proceeded to do one for us. The ship was running on a steady course and dropped from 42 kts to about 3 kts really fast. I you hadnâ€™t been hanging on, youâ€™d become somewhat of a flesh missile hazard. Impressive. Back up on the foils we went.

There was time to burn and I was on the bridge. The CO asked me: â€œSir, would you like to conn the ship?â€• Conning the ship is discussed in my post on backing out of station here. I replied: â€œNo, Iâ€™ve conned plenty of ships, I want to drive this one.â€• He had the helmsman get up and let me take his seat. On the PHM, the helmsman and lee helmsman (the person who directly operated the throttles) sit in chairs with seat belts. The controls for a helmsman are like a bomber control yoke, the big partial steering wheel. The CO ordered the OOD to execute a â€œFigure Eight.â€• They told me when the order â€œfull rudderâ€• is given, it means you turn the wheel until your hand touches your thigh. â€œRight Full Rudder!â€• â€œRight Full Rudder, Aye, Sir!â€• and I turned us to starboard. The ship heeled impressively at speed. â€œShift Your Rudder!â€• (position the rudder on the opposite side, the same number of degrees) â€œShift My Rudder, Aye, Sir!â€•

The ship sped along, straighted up, then began to heel the opposite way and the bow dipped and headed for the water! WHAM! Another â€œemergency landingâ€• just happened, but no one passed

the word. Sea spray engulfed the ship for a few moments, as we stopped. Everyone looked around sort of dazed, not because of injury, but more the â€œwhat just happenedâ€• kind of dazed. No one was hurt, but a few a little shocked when momentum took over unannounced.

In a few minutes, the Engineer reported to the Co that the landing had been caused by a gyro casualty. The PHMâ€™s had two foils aft, just forward of the stern. Each had underwater wings that were computer controlled, and the computer took the inputs from the gyros. The ship had two gyrocompasses. The initial software for the shipâ€™s flying stability did not account well for the loss of one gyro. When the software safety people evaluated the program, they found that if one gyroâ€™s signal was lost, the computer would compensate in such a way as to possibly cause the 288 ton vessel to cartwheel across the sea surface. The software was modified with a â€œfail safeâ€• mode as a result of this discovery. The new software, when if sensed the loss of one gyro signal would command the ship to land, which, would result in an unannounced â€œemergency landing.â€•

When things were all squared away, and they gyro back on line, we proceeded into port. The CO told me I was the only non-crewmember to ever â€œlandâ€• the ship.

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As we were about to depart, the Captain had â€œFlying Certificatesâ€• made out for each one of us. Iâ€™m not sure if it was OSCM Dave Roddy, or GCMC Dave Cress who looked at me and said â€œThey should have crumpled yours up, boss.â€•

History, and I was a piece of itâ€¦.

Category

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