â€œHow are we going to get that one?â€•

Description

There stood the Captain, the XO, the OOD, and a whole bunch of others, looking over the starboard bridge wing at the drone in the water, a few yards from the hull of the ship.

Rewind to the morning of that day in the northern Puerto Rican â€œOPAREA.â€• We were in the Caribbean to pump fuel and deliver stores to the â€œrealâ€• ships, who were down there exercising the equipment that differentiated them from being merchant hulls. We have a detachment from Fleet Composite Squadron Six (VC-6) embarked to provide drone target services.

The VC-6 guys loved using us as a launch platform. MILWAUKEE (AOR-2) had a big flight deck aft, designed to support two CH-46 cargo helicopters for VERTREP (vertical replenishment â€“ more on this in some future post). There were two cavernous hangers for the â€œbirdsâ€• built into the after superstructure, plenty of room to stage the drones on their launch platforms. They could set up the drones for launch in an area free of the elements, and with plenty of lighting in the pre-dawn period. When the operations were to begin, they rolled up the doors and wheeled the set up drones out to the deck edge, wired them up and they were ready to go.

They also loved to set up their control station in my helo control tower. Once more, it was enclosed, with three big windows, and an elevated, commanding view of the flight deck and aft of the ship. They flew the drones by watching an x-y plotter that dead reckoned the flight path of the drones. They would mark the plotting surface with the planned formation of shooters, so they could guide the drone over the ship getting its run. The drones launched with small rockets from the frame that held them and were on their way. It was pretty cool to hang out on the flight deck, between launches, and watch the tin cans lined up astern, pounding out VT-NF 5â€•/54 rounds at the inbound targets.

The plan for the day was to sequentially launch drones all day long, as each one reached fuel exhaustion and had the chute deployment commanded, the next one left the deck. My crew in Combat Information Center (CIC), under the watchful eyes of OSC â€œMac,â€• would plot the splash point of each drone, so we could send the helo out to retrieve them at the end of the exercise. Being pretty new at all of this, I recall he used an overlay for the maneuvering board with a â€œZâ€• on it. I wish I could remember the name of the method, but is was an â€œold schoolâ€• search and rescue plotting method. I do remember this: When the shooters smartly hauled off when the last target splashed, Chief Macâ€™s plotting drove the recovery platform to all six of them, regardless of the fact some had been floating out there for about 6 hours.

The VC-6 crew cleared their gear off the deck and an H-46 was rolled out for launch. They had the â€œwet crewmanâ€• (Search and Rescue Swimmer) aboard, and a long pendant to be used to attach to the hook on the top of the drone, so they could lift it and then deposit it back on the flight deck. The OS Helo Direction Controller in CIC vectored the H-46 to first drone and the Captain requested a course to one of the other drones. Off we steered to one of the orange unmanned vehicles.

Now Iâ€™m caught up. Wide angle shot from the pilot house door at the multitude of personnel of the

bridge watch team and the CO and XO leaning over the bulwark, some 50 feet above the ocean surface at this thing floating right next to us. Cut to the helo, about a half mile away, hovering so close to the water, that the wheels were almost touching the surface, with a mist of blowing sea water enveloping the chopper. You can see the movement of the pendant off the rear ramp, as the crew, invisible at this distance, due to the mist and shadowed interior of the helo, thrashed about, trying to snag the hook of the drone without much success.

Since the helo crew had their job somewhat under control and sunset coming in the not too distant time frame, we once again peer over the bridge wing. Finally, the CO rhetorically asks â€œHow are we going to get that?â€• After about 10 seconds of silence, I say â€œI will!â€• All eyes pan my direction. â€œI have my snorkeling gear in my stateroomâ€• I volunteer. The idea takes hold. I also look up at the Signal Bridge and ask if one of the SMs (who was a swimmer) wanted to go. He said â€œeyes,â€• and the Captain directed the crew to man the whaleboat. I took off and grabbed my gear, pulling on my pair of â€œUDTsâ€• and headed to the starboard boat davit. We lowered the boat, drove the short distance to the drone. The signalman and I rolled over the side and attached a line from the whaleboat to the drone. Once the line was secured to a set of bits, we swam over and each grabbed a wing, while the motor whaleboat pulled the drone over to a position under the boat boom. We connected the hook to the drone and up it went.

We had just shown how we could pretty much double up on drone recovery, get one with the helo, and one with the ship. In short order we had the 6 drones back aboard to be flushed out and prepped for future launches. Over the next few weeks, I got to recover a number of drones. Not only was it a fun break from watch standing, this happened in February, while our spouses and children were going through one of the coldest winters Norfolk, VA had had in quite some time.

The water temperature was a bathtub warm 85 degrees, and so clear that I could see the entire bottom of the ship from about a Â¼ mile away. The ship drew 40â€™ of draft when loaded and was 659â€™ long. The water depth was 12,000â€™ and it was incredible to look down in the water, seeing the sunâ€™s rays being swallowed by the dark blue way below the surface. In all my formal â€œswim callsâ€• during this operation, I only saw one fish, which was a very large sun fish that had come to inspect one of the drones. There were no sharks around, or anything else.

We steamed back into Norfolk on March 1st, during a snow storm. It was quite a contrast from the Caribbean. Actually, the snow wasnâ€™t such a bad deal compared to the dirty looks we got from our families because we had really nice sun tansâ€¦..

What can I say? Someone had to do itâ€¦

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