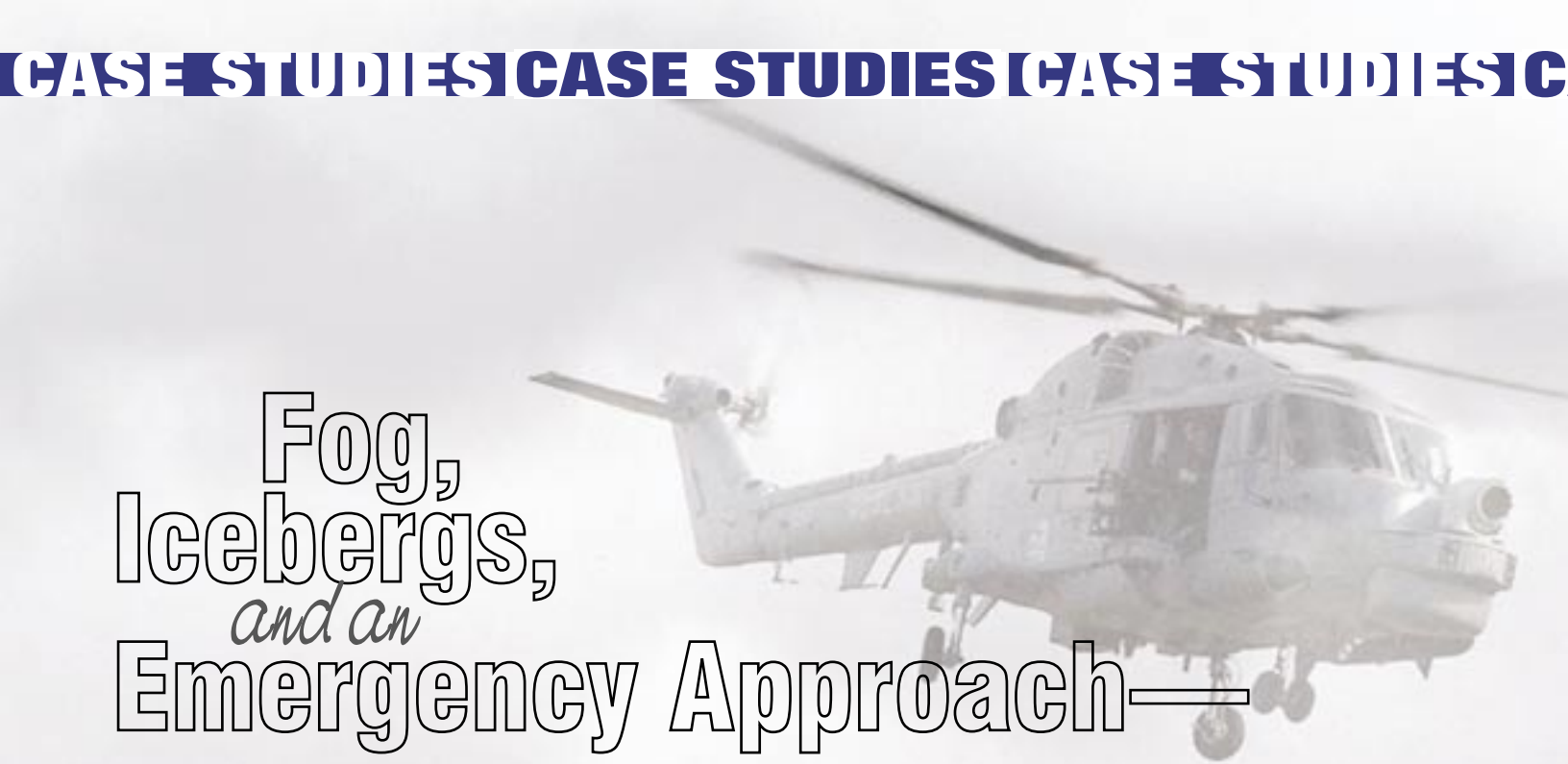

Fog, Icebergs, and an Emergency Approach—Who Needs ORM?

Here's a chance to put your ORM skills to work. Think about the five steps as you read this story from the September 2001 issue of Approach. What steps did the people involved follow? Did they skip any steps? Did they make any mistakes? What would you have done differently? Record your answers at the end. Then compare them with someone else's answers and discuss the differences.

As the only pilot on a Lynx "flight" (the British Royal Navy term for "detachment"), I was tasked to fly in all kinds of weather on all types of missions. My Lynx training had been in the typically rainy, foggy, and windy British weather. I had launched and landed in heavy seas during both day and night. I'd flown my NATOPS check in 500 and 1 conditions and worse. I'd conducted night missions at 100 feet and 120 knots, without goggles. Before my seven-month deployment patrolling the Falkland Islands and surrounding areas, I thought I was prepared for everything.

I woke up one day to an awesome, CAVU morning. We were anchored in Grytviken Harbor in the South Georgia Islands (900 nm ESE of the Falklands). Our mission was to look for illegal fishing boats. The weather brief included a dew point spread of one to two degrees, a water temp of nine degrees Celsius, and a high-pressure system hanging over the area.

A dense fog bank lurked outside the entrance to the harbor. Since I was also trained as the ship's weather-guesser, I recommended that even though the weather seemed great over the islands, we shouldn't fly until the fog burned off. Everyone concurred.

The ship pulled out of the harbor into the fog. While we waited in the hangar, the CO called down and told us to launch because the weather had improved to approximately 500 and

3. I looked outside and saw he was correct, but I told him that what he was seeing was the proverbial "sucker's gap."

However, upon further discussion with the flight commander and our flight observer under training, we decided to launch and increase the ship's radar coverage of the area. The flight observer and I launched to starboard and pulled power straight into the clouds at 200 feet. We descended to 100 feet and emerged from the clouds. We decided to continue the mission: Our radar was working, visibility was three miles, and we were the only aircraft within 900 nm.

I forgot to mention why we needed radar: The several hundred icebergs in the area reached up to 300 feet. We thought it would be a good idea to know where they were.

Forty-five minutes later, we found ourselves once again in and out of the fog. "Are we clear of all the icebergs?" I asked the flight observer.

"Yes we are," he replied. We slowly descended to 50 feet (minimum height for Lynx missions over water) as the cloud base kept lowering. At 50 feet, we were in continuous fog. What to do, what to do, what to do? Climb, climb, climb!

We climbed up through 2,000 feet with no clear sky in sight. I'd finally had enough and leveled off, because the winds were making us crab. I called the ship and told them we were RTB. They replied, "CO concurs with your RTB. We're in a fog bank. Recommend ELVA *[emergency low-visibility approach]* recovery." Great!

The flight observer gave us a steer to mother and kept us away from the icebergs. As we approached our ship, we asked for the ELVA with smoke lights. They were waiting for us and took control while the flight observer monitored our progress on radar. Our aircraft controller brought us in exactly on lineup with only minor corrections. Slowing to 40 knots and leveling at 40 feet, we came upon the first of five smoke lights. Normally we should've had the ship in sight after the fourth smoke light, but we didn't. We saw the fifth light and continued to motor forward at 40 feet. Our aircraft controller asked if we could see the flight deck yet. We looked out the window. No dice.

Just as we were about to wave off to try it again, I caught sight of the top of the hangar through the chin bubble. "Hangar in sight," I radioed back. "We're comin' down." I glued my eyes to that spot. We slowly lowered our hover and let the ship pull away. With the flight deck now partly obscured and indeed below us, the tension in the cockpit eased.

After we landed and shut down, I vowed to myself to never get suckered in by the weather or the perceived need to complete an unwarranted mission given the circumstances. A very worried-looking flight commander awaited us in the hangar. "I'm so glad you're back safely," he said. So were we.

by LCdr. Krist Zimmerman

LCdr. Zimmerman wrote this article when he was the safety officer at HSL-43. This event occurred while he was attached to HMS Northumberland flight as a Navy Personnel Exchange Program Officer flying the Lynx helicopter.

Identify the 5-step process as it was used (or should have been used) in this article. Here's a final hint from the author: "If an ORM tool—such as the flight-risk management worksheet we use in HSL-43—would have been available that foggy day, I would've been sitting in the ship's wardroom drinking a Guinness and staring out at the fog, rather than flying through it."

1. Identify hazards. _____

2. Assess hazards. _____

3. Make risk decisions. _____

4. Implement controls. _____

5. Supervise. _____

Answers on page 31.