



# Risk Management for the **PROFICIENT OPERATOR**

By Vice Admiral John P. Currier, U.S. Coast Guard

**The ability to recognize and mitigate risk is a critical component of mission success—and the sign of a true professional.**

**T**he U.S. Coast Guard consistently demonstrates unique effectiveness responding to widely varied missions, both planned and emergent. Our response ethic has been built on a foundation of over 223 years of experience, mainly in security, law enforcement,

aids to navigation, and rescue operations, and several key organizational characteristics contribute to our ability to handle successfully a broad range of operational challenges.

One of our distinct and defining strengths is empowerment at the tactical level and the encouragement of



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on-scene initiative. The Coast Guard's geographically distributed force lay down of small units in many locations fosters our ability to arrive at an incident relatively soon after it occurs. Our crews are expected to take charge, assess, report, and take action to the extent possible, adapting as necessary within doctrinal boundaries. We have a tiered command-and-control structure that provides oversight, coordination, and a follow-on stream of resources scaled to support mission requirements. The linchpin for this capable response system is the training, readiness, knowledge, and experience—in sum, the proficiency—of the on-scene mission commander.

In the August 2012 issue of *Proceedings*, our Commandant, Admiral Robert J. Papp Jr., provided an excellent view of proficiency, mastery of craft and leadership, and the concept of disciplined initiative for our workforce. The article has spurred a healthy dialogue regarding what is expected of each of us and how we should approach our personal preparedness to undertake mission tasking.

I intend to offer further perspective on the Commandant's expectations and begin to define the proficiency framework as it relates to successful mission execution. The ability to generate mission success through recognition and management of risk is key, and three essential yet distinct elements of our operational doctrine address the concepts of *warranted risk*, *manageable risk*, and the *vertical*

*integration of risk mitigation*. I challenge readers from all communities to consider these principles, think of your own operational experience, and apply the concepts described here.

## Warranted Risk

References to warranted risk exist in pockets of doctrine; policy; and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) within various specialties but, to date, have not been satisfactorily consolidated into overarching Coast Guard doctrine. While this is an ongoing effort, some fundamental principles must be understood by all.

Quite simply, warranted risk is the level to which we are permitted to hazard assets and crews for an expected mission gain. For example, the *Air Operations Manual* (COMDTINST M3710.1 series) states:

If a mission is likely to save human life, it warrants a maximum effort. When no suitable alternative exists and the mission has a reasonable chance of success, the risk of damage to or abuse of the aircraft is acceptable, even though such actions may render the aircraft unrecoverable. Probable loss of the aircrew is not an acceptable risk.

Through this doctrinal approach, the definition of warranted risk starts to form in a manner that is understandable to the tactical operator. This model, in its entirety, will be expanded in the near future for service-wide application in all operations, regardless of the particular community or asset employed. Whether acting as a patrol-boat commanding officer, station officer in charge, coxswain, aircraft commander, boarding-team member, or marine inspector, those of us engaged in operational execution must understand the bounds that the service has established regarding warranted risk for the situation at hand.

During routine operations, we are supported by a regime consisting of doctrine; policy; TTP; training and qualification; and rules and regulations, all designed as a system to guide how we conduct missions to ensure safe and effective results. While the majority of our operations fall into the normal or routine category, on occasion we are presented with highly challenging situations that require departure from accepted practice. For example, an operator may be faced with a lifesaving challenge in extreme weather, with restricted visibility, high seas, breaking surf, perhaps at night or even in icing conditions. The mission commander will reasonably ask, "How far can I push the envelope to accomplish this mission, and will my actions be justified?"

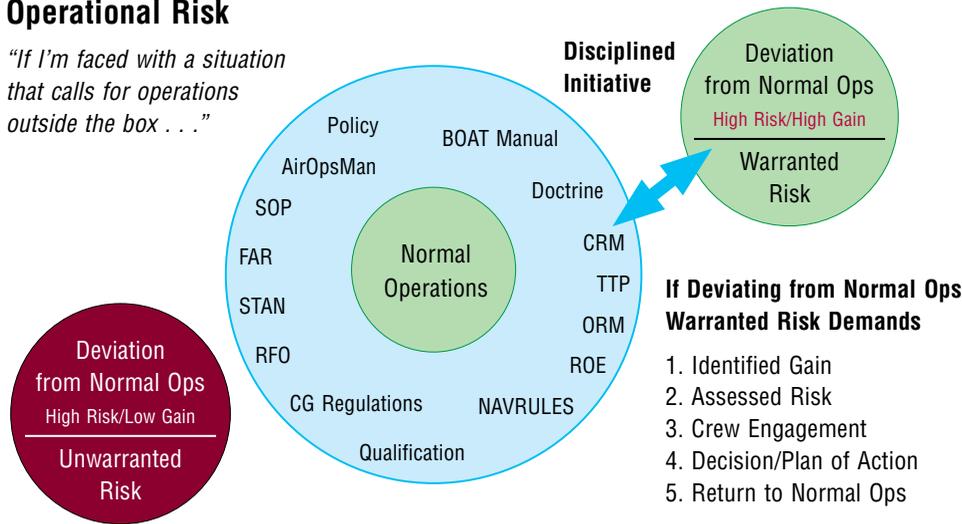
The first step in answering this critical question is for the operator to have an understanding of the functional definition of warranted risk. The importance of this cannot be overstated, and it is incumbent on commanders to promote dynamic, scenario-based training programs to ensure that knowledge and application of service policy for a given situation becomes second nature for operators at all levels. During this discussion unit commanders should make it clear that junior operators are always encouraged to reach back to them for consultation—conditions, time, and communications permitting. When operations requiring departure from the norm are anticipated, and the situation allows time for advance planning, full consultation with those in the chain of command should take place.

## Disciplined Initiative

When making an on-scene decision to operate beyond normal parameters, experience demonstrates that a few critical steps must be taken. As leader, the mission commander, in consultation with his or her crew, must both assess and articulate the risk being faced balanced against the probable gain of a proposed course of action. Considering that an essential element of effective leadership is listening, this communication is most effective as a dialogue. A clear course of action should be formulated. In this process, the mission commander should have thought through the immediate challenge and have a plan to return to a normal operational profile as soon as possible. What is described here, in reality, is employing the Operational Risk Management (ORM) and

## Operational Risk

“If I’m faced with a situation that calls for operations outside the box . . .”



Crew Resource Management (CRM) models when facing a serious mission challenge. The result is disciplined initiative, which is the optimal application of on-scene empowerment. When deviation from the normal operational profile is deemed necessary, using these techniques ensures that the operation remains within the warranted risk envelope.

Conducting operations in this way supports on-scene initiative that sometimes requires “out of the box” thinking, yet does so in a manner organized to accomplish the mission task both effectively and as safely as possible, always ensuring that the risk accepted is justified by the probable gain in completing the mission. It also employs the totality of crew experience and thought, offering the best possible way to address the situation.

While in command at both the unit and district levels, I often described it as such: If you are conducting a Coast Guard mission in a leadership position, whether a coxswain, aircraft commander, patrol boat skipper, marine inspector or otherwise, you are duty bound to follow doctrine, policy, TTP, and other guidance. If due to extreme conditions on-scene initiative calls for a deviation, you must pay due diligence to risk management and develop a well-thought plan of action. If bad things happen while you are conducting a proper mission in a professional manner, leadership at all levels will stand behind you. You are clearly operating in the regime of warranted risk. However, if you choose to operate in the realm of unwarranted risk, perhaps disregarding doctrine, regulations, navigation rules, or other guidance in a high risk/low gain situation and bad things happen, you can ex-

pect a level of personal and professional accountability since you have failed in your role as leader.

The mission commander plays a critical role in the prosecution of any assignment and by Coast Guard regulation is ultimately in charge, responsible, and accountable. However, he or she is supported by a crew, all of whom are duty bound to voice concerns when an operation is conducted without due regard to risk management or in an unsafe manner. This is

a central precept of ORM and CRM.

## The Risk Spectrum

To be a proficient leader, one must also understand that operational risk exists on a spectrum. In the Coast Guard, our operators are required to face risk every day. Each time the lines come in, an aircraft leaves the ground, a boat gets underway, a boarding team engages, or a marine inspector enters a foreign ship, operators face a level of hazard. Certainly there are degrees of risk, some tasks more demanding and some more routine, yet the constant across all missions is the presence of risk. As a culture, Coast Guard men and women are not risk averse. Throughout our 223-year-history we honor most those who have faced near-insurmountable odds and survived; their stories are part of our DNA.

There are two main elements of operational risk: those that are manageable and those that are beyond our control. A crew’s readiness to meet the challenges in an impending mission is largely a matter that resides within their span of control. Is the crew trained adequately, are they qualified, proficient, rested, and fed? Are they wearing the proper personal protective equipment, have they been

briefed, have ORM and CRM been practiced? All these elements mitigate *manageable (controllable) risk*. Other factors, like on-scene weather, sea state, communications reliability, visibility, day versus night, and the urgency of the situation fall into the unmanageable category. These factors must be faced and overcome if the risk is warranted. Successful mission execution may well come down to the question of “have all aspects of manageable risk been adequately mitigated such that my crew is best pre-

Manageable Risk	Unmanageable Risk
Supervision	On-Scene Weather
Collaboration	Darkness/Reduced Visibility
C3 Coordination	Degraded Asset Condition
Mission Planning	Fatigue/Stress
Crew Selection	Poor Communications
Crew Fitness	Sea State
Qualification/Proficiency	
Asset Selection	
Material Readiness	
Area Knowledge	

pared to accept risks that are beyond our control?” If the answer to that question is yes, then preparations are complete, and the outcome rests on the courage, knowledge, skills, and proficiency of our operators.

## Vertically Integrated Risk Mitigation

An often overlooked area for consideration, particularly during complex, high-stress missions, is the concept of vertical integration of risk mitigation up and down the chain of command. This process is owned by every echelon in the operational chain of command for a particular mission. Each level has a unique view and influence on the execution of the tactical mission. Starting with the mission initiator, often a district or sector command center, and extending down to the pilot, coxswain, or deck watch officer, risk should be assessed and mitigated at each level in an integrated manner. The keys to this are communication and coordination.

It is not sufficient for the mission initiator to gather information, decide on a course of action, task it out, and wait for the results. These cases are universally dynamic and initial information often inaccurate. Constant situational awareness and communication are required at every level in order to anticipate and discuss potential problems. By identifying and mitigating manageable risks along the way, operators can minimize the compounding effects of unmanageable risk that manifest when the crew

is most vulnerable. Often, this can be accomplished by employing suitable alternatives, and it is incumbent on all levels in the chain of command to fully explore viable options that offer lower risk before and during case prosecution.

For example, the sector receives a request for a night medevac in low-visibility conditions from a commercial vessel via small boat. Although the consulting physician validates the medical need, the sector controller poses a follow-on option for a brief delay until daylight, which is discussed and approved. Through this action, risk for responders has been reduced. Our assets and people should never be subject to “fire and forget” leadership. History demonstrates that our most successful cases have been accomplished through effective teamwork.

Understanding the concepts of warranted risk, manageable risk, and vertically integrated risk mitigation is important to everyone involved in Coast Guard operations or support. Full recognition and mitigation of man-

ageable risk is a hallmark of the professional operator in the execution of missions ranging from routine to those involving great hazard. The recently conducted Aviation Safety Assessment Action Plan (ASAAP) revealed that mishaps often occurred during routine operations mainly because risks were being taken for granted, and our crews were sometimes complacent. By embracing the results of ASAAP and committing to change, the aviation community has been able to improve its safety culture materially. Many of these lessons have been learned the hard way and reaffirmed by tragedy, and virtually all apply across community lines.

We are part of a proud service, one of the best organizations in the U.S. government. Our reputation with the American people has never been stronger, and our pro-



**A Coast Guard law-enforcement detachment interdicts a cocaine-smuggling self-propelled semi-submersible in the Eastern Pacific. Successfully executing a mission—whether it is a drug interdiction, boarding, or search and rescue—requires managing operational risk up and down the chain of command.**

agement is routinely heralded in many circles. This is primarily a reflection of our performance in difficult situations—those requiring unique knowledge, skills, ability, and teamwork to be successfully resolved. Many of the challenges we face involve considerable physical risk, and as a group we are not averse to those dangers. The true professional, while having the courage to face risk that cannot be controlled, is certain that he or she has paid careful attention to all aspects of manageable risk mitigation at the outset of any mission. The days of the Lifesaving Service standing order and Keeper Richard Etheridge’s iconic quote: “The book says that you have to go out, but nothing is said about having to come back” is an antiquated vestige of our history. Today’s expectation is that you will go out, execute the mission successfully, and return safely. In that, we remain *Semper Paratus*. ❄

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