SEA STORY

Captain John R. Lincoln, USN (Ret.)
Served 1955-1987

One morning we were to have two helicopters arrive at the ship (the USS AMERICA CV-66) in the VACAPES (Virginia Capes) -- just off the coast of Virginia Beach. Those helicopters were delivering two loads of Senators and Representatives -- mostly involved in the Armed Services committees -- to watch flight ops for the day.

The evening before, I told the captain that we would have fog the next morning and it would likely affect our being able to recover those two helicopters. He grunted that he understood. Then at about 04:30 the next morning I was waiting for him when he arrived on the bridge -- when we were still in the warm water of the Gulf Stream, the visibility was at least ten nautical miles and everything looked good -- where we were. But I pointed out that the plan was for us to go into the cold water of the Labrador Current to be ready to meet the helicopters. I pointed out that NAS Oceana already had less than half a mile visibility and that Chesapeake Lightship was reporting zero-zero (no visibility and could not see the clouds above). I asked if we could stay just inside the Gulf Stream where the visibility was good. He said that we had been given a point in the ocean (inside the cold water) to recover the helicopters and that was where we would go. I went back to my office (three decks below the navigation bridge) and a few minutes later two things happened simultaneously -- the fog horn began to sound VERY LOUDLY and my phone rang. The captain wanted me back on the bridge RIGHT NOW. I ran up the ladder to the bridge and we could not see the flight deck just below us -- because of the very dense fog. The wind was from the southeast and was blowing warm moist air from the Gulf Stream toward the northwest and over the colder water -- and producing shallow, but very dense fog.

Meanwhile, we were continuing further into the cold water and I told him our only hope was that the helicopters had enough fuel to follow us to the warm water where they could land. The helicopters could not see the flight deck (which was 66 feet above the sea) and could only see the top of our mast sticking out of the fog. I recommended we do a U-turn and go back a few miles to the warm water, which he ordered the officer of the deck to do. I was standing behind the captain's chair on the bridge looking to port. Suddenly, I saw something that I thought would allow us to land the helicopters at that point. We were already in the turn to go back to the southeast and I told the captain, **steady up on this course and we can recover them here**. I didn't wait to get his answer, but as I went through the hatch (I heard him order the OD to steady up on this course) to leave the bridge and run up one deck to PRIFLY (the tower where the Air Boss and his helpers controlled flight operations). When I got there, I told the Air Boss to get the helicopters on a reciprocal relative heading of 260° and we should be able to land them. He didn't question me, but, by UHF radio, ordered the helicopters to where I told him and they flew up the stack gasses and landed on the flight deck. What had happened was that as I was looking to the port side of the flight deck, I caught a glimpse of the two helicopters and realized that the stack gasses were heating a small cone of air so that the temperature-dew point spread was enough to burn off the fog and in only about a 10° arc the visibility was just enough for the helicopters to land safely. They did so and our problem was solved.

That is just one example of how using knowledge of the atmosphere and the fact that we were the next to the last fossil fuel (oil) powered aircraft carrier (in 1972) in the U.S. Navy, we could pull that off. With nuclear powered aircraft carriers, that is not possible as there is no smokestack and therefore no possibility to heat the atmosphere only slightly in a small area to clear a small window for landing aircraft.

Being the meteorologist on an aircraft carrier is surely the most challenging job for a meteorologist anywhere. Every minute there is something going on that is affected by the weather, sea conditions, underwater thermal structure, etc. and the meteorologist has to be on his (or now it might be a her) toes to use the weather to their advantage. I worked harder and longer hours on that aircraft carrier than any other time in my long career. It was extremely challenging and at the end of the day, it gave me a real feeling of accomplishment.

Ending note: I was a CDR at that time and we had a crew in the weather office of 15 total -- including one AGCS and two AG1s, qualified forecasters, and 12 other AGs and strikers. I have never seen a group of people (sailors) work as closely and as a team as that group!!! It was an honor to serve with them. P.S. I am now 91.