

Situational Awareness

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My first duty station was a ship stationed in Norfolk, Virginia. One day, I had been ashore for a meeting and was returning to the ship. On this particular occasion, I climbed the brow of the ship, saluted the National Ensign flying on the fantail of the ship, then saluted the Officer of the Deck and reported my return aboard. I then strode across the quarterdeck and headed aft to my office.

About 10 feet away from the quarterdeck, the Officer of the Deck called to me and asked me to come back for a moment. He pointed out that one of his sailors was repainting the white line on the deck that delineated the quarterdeck and told me that I had stepped where the sailor had just painted. Fortunately, I didn't mess up the paint, but he quickly told me, "Chaplain, you've got to have all of your antennae rotating, or you'll get yourself killed aboard ship!" In other words, if you don't pay attention to what is going on around you, you could be killed or cause someone else to be killed or injured.

The lesson I learned that day is that it is always important to pay attention to what is going on around you. In the military, we call this "situational awareness." It means that we have got to remain vigilant, especially in situations that are life threatening or dangerous.

From time to time, I have to remind myself to keep all of my antennae rotating. I frequently find myself engrossed in thought, intent on what I am doing or mulling over a problem as I walk along. Sometimes, people will speak to me or greet me and I simply do not hear them, mainly because I am so focused on what I am doing. It is fine to be intent on what we are doing, but we don't ever want to lose situational awareness. There are specific circumstances under which we want to be able to tune out distractions and focus on our specific mission, but usually this is the exception, not the rule.

One reason it is good to maintain an awareness of what is going on around us is that if we are on the battlefield, we may need to respond to changing events. Someone along side us may become injured and need assistance. There may be a warning being passed to us and we need to be able to respond. We can't respond to these circumstances if we are so focused on what we are doing that we can't hear.

It is important in everyday life to maintain an awareness of others around us. While we may be doing something very important, we still need to be aware of those around us so that we can either heed their warnings or respond to someone else in need. Effective situational awareness actually comes from the ability to see things in a broader perspective, not just what I am doing at this very moment. It assumes that I am part of a larger plan, not just an isolated being. We have to understand how we are working together to accomplish the "Commander's Intent."

The old expression that "no man is an island" is true. We are not self-sufficient, isolated humans. We are part of a larger system called the human race. God created us to be social by nature. We need to interact with others and we need to be able to respond to them when they need help. We can't help, though, if we fail to hear them cry to us. Besides, we want them to listen when we cry out to them, too. Be aware of each other and take care of each other.

Semper Fi in the Lord and I hope to see you in church on Sunday.