

Crew Resource Management

Decision Making
Assertiveness
Mission Analysis
Communication
Leadership
Adaptability/Flexibility
Situational Awareness

LAY DOWN THE LAW



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By Lt. Sean Stevens

As I studied to qualify as helicopter aircraft commander (HAC), I spent hours going over possible emergencies. I thought about a variety of engine failures, tail-rotor problems, icing, and more. If it was an emergency procedure (EP), I wanted to know how to deal with it. In all my studies, I never imagined a member of my crew, and a senior member at that, could quickly and unexpectedly put every member of my crew's lives at risk by a simple loss of situational awareness.

I qualified as HAC in the SH-60B in December 2005. My squadron deployed in March 2006, and three months later, I qualified as functional check pilot (FCP). I spent my first two months of deployment on board USS *Shoup* (DDG-86) and then transferred to USS *Abraham Lincoln* (CVN-72), so that another junior officer could gain "small deck" experience. This was my second deployment on the CVN, so I was familiar with the environment but was experiencing it for the first time as a HAC.

My first functional check flight (FCF) as a designated FCP was to be a B/C profile, following the removal and replacement of a failed stabilator actuator. I reviewed my checklist and made sure I got a good night's sleep before the 0430 brief.

My copilot was a new department head. A former FCP, he wanted to get familiar with the CVN environment before resuming his qualification. I included him in all pre-flight preparations and looked for signs



Photo by PHAN James R. Evans.

HSL-47, based at NAS North Island, is a nontraditional LAMPS Mk-III squadron that deploys as a squadron with a carrier strike group (CSG) aboard carriers, cruisers and destroyers.

to indicate whether our rank differences would negatively affect the flight.

After the NATOPS brief, the SDO relayed that the aircraft was not yet ready.

At 0900, the maintenance-control chief rushed into the ready room, and said, “701 is ready to go; you have to go now.”

We grabbed our gear and headed up to the flight deck. Despite the sense of urgency, 701 wasn’t yet spotted. We had to wait 10 minutes while the yellowshirts

IC’s push-to-talk setting. The aircraft lifted about five feet, and I thought it would roll with only one chain attached.

We didn’t roll, nor did we injure anyone under the aircraft. When we viewed the ILARTS tape after our near-mishap, we saw that the chock-runners had removed the chains a fraction of a second before the aircraft had lifted. When the PAC realized what he had done, he stabilized in a low hover to give the launch crew time to recover, and then he set down the aircraft.

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moved 701 to spot five. Once the aircraft was spotted, I preflighted as my copilot sat in the pilot seat to spread the rotor blades. When I strapped into the ATO’s seat, my copilot said he had completed all prestart checklists and was ready for engine start. Because this flight was my first as an FCP, I wanted to go by the book—I didn’t want to rush. I told him to wait as I reviewed the prestart checklist.

Once caught up with the prestart checklist, I proceeded with the engine-start/rotor-engagement checklists. Again, my copilot got ahead of me; obviously he was in a rush to get off the deck. When I told him we needed to slow down, I don’t think he heard me.

All he said was “Dude! Dog is calling. We need to get off the deck.”

I replied that I would not take off until we were ready. I then reviewed my checklist, completed the NAV SYNC, and was ready to launch. We had rushed to this point and had gotten out of sequence, but I was confident we were ready to launch. My copilot made the “up and ready” call, while I switched to steady on the position lights. He then called to go to “upper flashing,” which does not come until after we lift. I wondered why he had made this call so soon until I realized he was starting to take off with the chocks and chains still attached. The launch crew also still was under the rotor arc.

I screamed “Down... down... down.” But the pilot-at-the-controls (PAC) didn’t hear me—I had selected

Looking back on this event, I learned how to prevent a similar occurrence. First, use the ICS VOX setting. I don’t know how many times I have heard someone say “Hot Mike!” when someone’s VOX is set too sensitive. If I had had my VOX turned on, my copilot would have heard my warning. Don’t rely on your presence-of-mind to key the mike in an emergency. Second, as PIC, guard the controls. I am now very sensitive to this procedure in all flight regimes, even on deck. Finally, despite differences in rank and experience, do not be complacent with any copilot. Be prepared to elevate your assertiveness when you are the PIC. Had I been more assertive, I could have set the tone in the cockpit, possibly preventing this event. As PIC, you have been placed in charge of the flight by the commanding officer. Regardless of rank or experience, you may come to a point in your career where you’ll need to lay down the law.

I now take this experience with me every time I fly, and I feel safer as a result. I use the ICS VOX setting, guard the controls, and discuss any potential CRM issues as they arise. I know some pilots think it’s a little too “touchy-feely” to talk about your crew dynamic in flight. If you are getting grouchy or frustrated, or your copilot is getting pushy, taking a little time to address the situation may be all that is needed to improve your CRM posture. Flying may not be more fun, but it will be safer. 

Lt. Stevens flies with HSL-47.