Rough Landing

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By LCdr. Jerrod E. Devine

I was a new LAMPS detachment OinC and recently had read an article written by an HSL-46 det OinC about his experience during Neptune Warrior (NW). The author's crew had had to make a tough choice shortly after launching when the weather conditions rapidly deteriorated. They had had to decide to divert to the beach or return to the ship, not knowing if they could land.

Photo by MCS3 Ron Reeves. Modified.

I used his article and its scenario in our NW 06-3 briefs before shipboard operations with USS *Samuel B. Roberts* (FFG-58). We gathered some absolutely great lessons from their experience. Nothing like that was going to happen to us, though. Boy, was I wrong! Here's my story.

We had some rough weather (heavy seas and wind) the first week out of Faslane, Scotland, and tried to follow our exercise brief. However, because of the weather, some events were cancelled—the ORM process was working.

The night started out well enough. The seas were fairly calm, and we looked good to fly three events in support of the NW exercise. The first launch took off uneventfully, with the exception of degraded communications. The ship had taken down land/launch (L/L) to support another frequency, and when they patched L/L back in, the communications from the helo to the LSO shack barely were readable. This comm problem was the first opportunity to stop the mishap links from building.

The first crew came back on time, landed, and my crew jumped in ready to continue surface and possibly subsurface warfare ops. The comms still were weak but manageable (under low-stress conditions). Why didn't we stop there or wait on deck until the comm issues were resolved? We were given another chance to break the link but didn't.

About halfway through the event, the ASTAC (ship's air controller) made a comment about taking a real good pitch or roll. I questioned him on what he had said, as the seas at our location looked fine (from 700 feet AGL). We were about 35 miles north of the ship, conducting an area search, while the ship moved toward us. We had no further discussion regarding the apparent building of the seas—another link was added.

We finished our event, and the ship called flight quarters on time; we had 1,200 pounds of fuel left, which was plenty of gas. As we descended to 200 feet and started our practice approaches to the flight deck, we could see the ship pitching and rolling heavily. I mentioned to the crew that our landing would be interesting.

The ship searched for about 20 minutes to find a heading that minimized their pitch and roll. With winds in the envelope, though, they could not find one. The LSO told us we were out of limits and would be taking a recovery-assisted (RA) landing.

We got a green deck with about 900 pounds of fuel left. I let my copilot, one of the detachment's H2Ps, shoot the approach, while I closely guarded the controls. As the nose of the helo came across the deck edge, the ship took a very severe pitch up, and our stress level pegged at high.

The horizon-reference-set bar became our best friend in the world. My copilot had an extremely difficult time maintaining position because of the excessive ship motion (pitch 3 to 4 degrees, rolls 8 to 10 degrees and occasionally greater). I took the controls, hoping to have a better time maintaining position.

Then the communications issue crept back in. With the LSO and me at a high stress level, it became difficult to effectively communicate with the one person I needed most: the LSO. I had to talk on L/L and have the ASTAC relay it internally to the LSO. Two hook-up attempts were made without success, and we were told the messenger cable actually had severed—there went our chance at an RA landing.

We now were down to about 650 pounds of fuel. An airport in Stornoway, Scotland, was about 10 miles to our west. Why hadn't we plotted its position earlier in the flight? Was this another link for us?

We had a decision to make: Do we land on a deck clearly outside of landing limits, or do we make a run to the beach? I had the LSO clear the deck very quickly and let him know I would try a free-deck landing. I figured if it just wasn't possible, I could divert to the beach and land. This plan would have meant landing below minimum fuel state.

With the ship severely pitching and rolling, the LSO gave me cueing on when he thought the deck would be level. Every so often, the deck would subside for about 10 seconds, which seemed like forever. I maintained the higher hover until the LSO called me clear for landing; we could hear him fine, but he couldn't hear us. I landed and shut down the aircraft. My nerves were shot.

We definitely learned some lessons that night. I should have taken the ASTAC's comments with greater caution, especially in the unpredictable waters off Scotland, and asked him to monitor the ship's attitude for at least the next 10 minutes. We could have asked the ship to turn around to reach better waters, so we could have landed early and called it a night. We've since discussed this evolution with our air controllers and bridge-watch teams.

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The seas were deceiving to us from the air. I usually associate the ship's big pitch and roll, lots of wave action and white caps, with increased winds. We did not see those conditions that night. The winds were not incredibly strong, and the seas just were rolling in. After later talking with the OOD, I'm not sure they could have found better conditions for us. Take away the pitch, and the rolls would have been even worse. Take away the rolls, and the pitch would have been much worse.

Seeing the effects of degraded communications on what was an absolutely miserable night has changed my comfort level when conducting any operations without perfect comms. Maybe I should have reached that decision earlier—I wish I had. I since have gotten concurrence from the captain that, to avoid future communications issues, as long as the air department is embarked, we do not take down L/L.

Sending articles to *Approach* and having aviators read and learn from them is a proactive step in aviation safety. I had read the earlier article and thought I had learned the lessons, but I was wrong. There are hundreds of hazards out there; each one is waiting patiently to reach up and cause a bad night. I hope this story helps the next crew make better decisions.

LCdr. Devine flies with HSL-48.