

THE BIG PICTURE

By Lt. Ron Zenga

Our aircraft was the first of four Eightballers to arrive in Key West. A little more than eight hours earlier, we had begun our journey from South Whiting, completing three day VFR navigation legs and one night VFR nav leg. My two students had performed well; they had studied hard, and all the legs were uneventful.

The second and third Sea Rangers landed shortly after we did, and once they had shut down, my student naval aviator (SNA) and I began to put our aircraft to bed for the night. While SNA No. 1 installed the pitot-tube covers at the nose of the aircraft, I unloaded the baggage compartment and stowed our SV-2s. SNA No. 2 gathered the charts and flight pubs from the back of the aircraft. About then, Eightballer No. 4 arrived, and things began to go downhill.

As No. 4's helo taxied behind us, I felt a puff of rotor wash on my face. A half-second later, I looked up in time to see the left rear door (remember the SNA gathering the charts?) torn from its hinges by the full force of the rotor wash. The door came to a rest a few feet from the SNA at the nose of the aircraft.

After a few choice words, we got together at the door and made a few calls. The maintenance contractor said they had no hinges in supply—neither did their associates in Fort Lauderdale. They said my best option was to mail the door home and return with just three doors on the aircraft.

Heading back with only three doors would have been the quick and easy solution, but fortunately, our squadron SOP intervened. After speaking with the squadron CDO, we agreed the TH-57 could only be flown with the doors off during syllabus events, which required the doors to be off. You guessed it: VFR navigation requires all doors to be attached to the aircraft.

My options rapidly narrowed down to one: Wait for a contract-maintenance pilot to fly to Key West, hot seat his four-door aircraft to me in exchange for my three-

door model, and then continue training. What had begun as a Friday-through-Sunday cross country quickly had grown into a Friday-through-Wednesday event.

With Key West receiving nearly three inches of rain that weekend, we all wanted to be somewhere else, least of all stuck somewhere with no control over when we would leave. Bottom line: As the aircraft commander, I was responsible for the damage that had occurred to my aircraft, regardless of how it happened. I was about to find out how much more I really was responsible for.

Our flights home were as uneventful as the flight to Key West. We returned home late Wednesday, and I promptly was in my skipper's office first thing Thursday morning. As it turns out, I was the 16th door incident of the year in the HTs, and the chain of command was none too pleased. The problem with doors being blown off had been addressed via emails and AOMs, but the doors seemed to keep blowing off. Our skipper got all of our attention when he cited my lack of oversight for not making sure the SNA had positive control over the door at all times. He even mentioned the incident in Key West, I could have been flying students and completing at least six more Xs. My students could have been moving closer to their wings by flying another three Xs. The aircraft could have flown countless more flights with other instructors. Furthermore, the nearly \$10,000 spent on per diem and fuel could have funded several other cross-country flights. Call it the domino effect.

While we can't plan for maintenance failures or weather delays, we always can strive to better supervise our crews in flight and on the deck—especially when your crew consists of students. As training-command instructors, our job is to provide competent copilots to the fleet in a time of war. What may have seemed like a small amount of damage and a small delay, when looked at from the perspective of the big picture, wasn't such a small thing. 

Lt. Zenga flies with HT-8.