



My Midnight Swim

I called out, “90 feet...80 feet,” and realized something wasn’t right. As I watched the radalt hit 60 feet, I called “Power! Power! Power!”

By Ltjg. Katie Merhige

It was a dark, moonless night...no, really, it was! My crew launched on what was supposed to be a double bag in support of JTFEX with a ship. I was flying left seat as an H2P. Our mission was to find and “kill” a sub that was tasked to attack the ship during a RAS.

With the first flight coming to a close, we donned our NVGs and planned to return and refuel. The ASTAC said landing on mother would be a problem because mom had started the RAS exercise early and currently was alongside. In addition, our other helo had been pulled out of the hangar for a pax-mail-cargo run to the beach. The domino effect of CRM breakdown began; it would eventually result in the loss of an aircraft and my unexpected swim in the ocean.

The typical SOCAL marine layer had moved in, creating a black night that made our goggles virtually useless. Even goggled, we only could make out a faint horizon. But, because of the goggles, we felt confident in diverting to a DDG to refuel.

Then the ASTAC told us the ready deck wasn’t NVG-compatible (flight I). Our new plan was to degoggle, land, refuel, then regoggle for the second bag. We flipped up our goggles to readjust our eyes to the black night. We were flying on a moonless night, at 200 feet over the water.

When the HAC gave me the controls, I didn’t climb. I stayed at 200 feet and flew inbound to the

ship while the HAC degoggled and set up the cockpit for non-NVG night operations and our landing. We briefed landing on a DDG (flight I) (I had never landed on one) and the offset approach we would need to shoot but nothing in great detail. The HAC said he would fly the approach because he was in the right seat and could see the superstructure as we approached. The HAC had experience on this class of ship, so I trusted him.

I flew a couple of passes while the ship set up for our recovery. The HAC took the controls on one of the outbound legs as the ship passed us the final numbers. We had intended to fly another pass, but, when we were a mile astern, the ship gave us a green deck to land. Since we already were at 200 feet, the HAC entered the normal glidepath at the half-mile mark and 200 feet—one of our checkpoints. I don't remember discussing we would be intercepting the approach halfway through it. As we hit this checkpoint, I backed up the HAC with the mandatory instrument scan.

You may be wondering why I haven't mentioned the aircrewman. He was in the back preparing a fuel chit to expedite our time on deck. He knew we were on final, but we failed to include him in our silent plan to shoot a non-standard approach. We hit our next checkpoint about 25 feet low. I told the HAC we were at one-third mile, 100 feet, and 30 knots indicated—we were long, low and a bit fast. I never told him to pull power or level off. I assumed when he heard me call the checkpoint, he would respond. I heard nothing from him, and we continued our descent.

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Everything was in slow motion. As I reached for the collective, I watched the radalt hit 20 feet. I was in denial about what was happening. I couldn't understand why we didn't level off or climb. I looked outside to see if the water was as

close as my radalt indicated, or if something was wrong with my instruments, and the HAC still had everything under control.

As I looked up, we hit the water, and the helo immediately rolled to the right. We all successfully egressed and were recovered by the DDG.

A multitude of things could have been done differently to prevent this mishap. Because we had flown together repeatedly as a crew, we were too confident and comfortable with one another; we believed everyone knew what was going on without having to say anything. I never heard a word from the aircrewman backing up the approach, mostly because the two pilots failed to make it clear exactly what approach we were doing. I never heard a word from the HAC the entire time on the approach, either acknowledging we were low or telling me what he saw. I failed to pull power when I noticed we were low.

What should have been done? We should have briefed the approach and everyone's responsibilities in more detail, especially since I never had seen an offset approach, and it was an IMC night. It turned out I was on a complete instrument scan while the HAC was on a visual scan outside. I later learned the HAC saw red (below glideslope) on the SGSI the whole approach. He thought he had it under control and never told the rest of the crew. The aircrewman should have backed us up on altitude and closure. We should have talked more about how dark it was. It would have been a good idea to climb to 400 feet and to fly out a few miles to set up for the normal approach. Or, we should have stayed at 200 feet and flown the NATOPS-alternate approach.

As an inexperienced H2P at shipboard operations, I put too much faith in my HAC and blindly trusted his decisions. There are two pilots and an aircrewman in a helicopter for a reason. My crew failed to use checks and balances to prevent our mishap. Never let complacency replace good communication in the cockpit—it could have disastrous results. 

Ltjg. Merhige flies with HSL-49.