

# Complacency

## on the Flight Deck

By ADC(AW) Bradley Cox

**C**omplacency is a word we hear during safety training, GMT, and other briefs. It is the animal that will kill us when we stop thinking about our jobs and ignore the risks. No matter how many times we train or how many times we have done the job, when we stop thinking and go on autopilot, myriad things can happen to us. My helicopter detachment was reminded of the “C word” and its insidious danger. We found out how easily someone can get hurt doing a simple, routine task.

The detachment was deployed on board USNS *Niagara Falls* (T-AFS-3). We were off the coast of Japan, and our tasking was a routine vertrep to the USS *Kitty Hawk* (CV-63), which is a bread-and-butter mission for the HC community. After launching our first helicopter, we began to spot our other aircraft on the flight deck. It already had been pre-staged with approximately 100 external loads and was wet from a night’s rain. Since dawn was still an hour-and-a-half away, only the ship’s overhead lights illuminated the flight deck. The seas were rough, adding another level of excitement as the ship pitched and rolled. Needless to say, the conditions were not perfect, but we had done this mission countless times before.

Moving an aircraft on a small deck is an all-hands effort because the plane must be pushed out of the hangar. The “driver” manipulates a tilly bar, which is attached to the tail wheel. That person’s job is to

steer the helicopter, while other maintainers push on attached bars. The director and a safety observer are positioned in the back with the driver, and two more safety observers are positioned up front. These Sailors are in full view of the director and the brake driver.

At the start of our deployment, we always took a few extra minutes to brief the aircraft move. As time wore on, we became more proficient at the task, and the briefs became less frequent. After all, we were a well-trained and well-practiced team, who knew exactly what we were doing!

With everyone in position, the director called, “Chocks out.” That command was the signal to begin the move, so the safety observers and director concentrated on the task. They had to make sure the aircraft was clear of the hangar and the loads were pre-staged on the deck. They did that part of the job but failed to notice the ship had started pitching and rolling, which caused the aircraft to accelerate. Once the tail wheel is moved away from centerline during a backward move, the motion of the helicopter tends to push the tail wheel farther from center. In order to keep the tail of the helicopter under control, the driver was working really hard to make adjustments to the “tilly bar.” When the director finally noticed that problem, it was too late. The driver lost his struggle with the bar, slipped on the wet deck and fell, losing control of the bar and aircraft. The bar rotated to the port side of the aircraft, knocking down one of the “pushers.” When

the rear safety observer and the director saw the driver fall, they blew their whistles but couldn't stop the move before the bar had hit the pusher.

After escorting the pusher to medical and inspecting the aircraft for damage, the move continued, and air operations resumed without further incident.

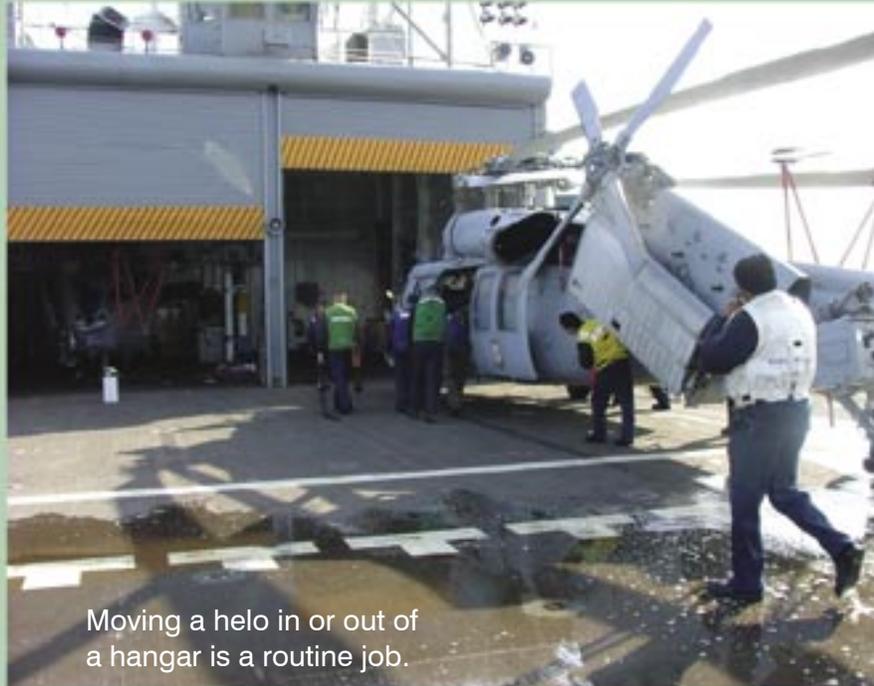
So what went wrong? We had moved many aircraft at all times of the day and night, in both calm and rough seas. However, our vast experience got in the way when we neglected to hold a pre-move brief. We didn't emphasize the weather conditions or other factors placed on us to get the helicopter positioned for launch. The observers and the director were too concerned with the positions of the loads, not on the speed of the move. Past experience had taught us that excessive rolling and pitching of the ship quickly could cause the aircraft to gain unsafe speeds without any assistance from the pushers. During this move, we thought everything was under control, but our lax attitude had gotten the better of us.

Regardless of how many times a detachment moves aircraft, a pre-move brief always must be held. Had we taken just one extra minute to discuss and think about the environmental conditions, we would have prevented this incident. A spotting dolly is being tested that will make moving aircraft on single-spot ships safer and more controllable. Unfortunately, until it is delivered to the fleet, we still must move helos manually.

We got a bit lucky this time: No one was injured, and no aircraft were damaged. This near-mishap reminds us of the everyday dangers we face in our jobs. It is important to take time to preview our tasks and to give them our full attention; after all, any task done at sea has the potential to be dangerous.



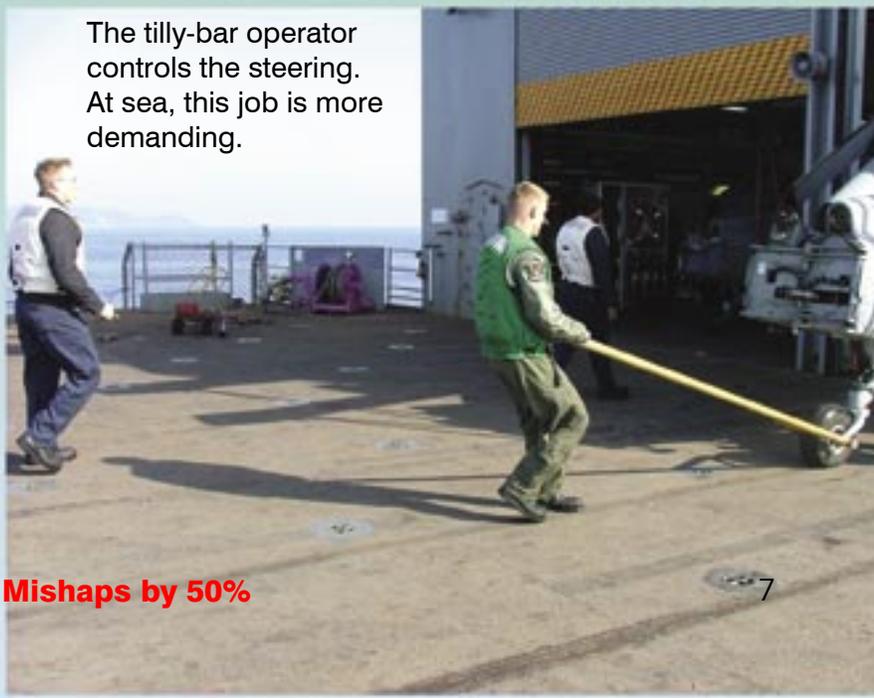
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Moving a helo in or out of a hangar is a routine job.



With enough people to help, it's an easy and relatively safe task.



The trolley-bar operator controls the steering. At sea, this job is more demanding.