



# Bird on a Wi

By LCdr. Mike Beidler

“Sir! Break left! We’re going to hit the tower!”

With those words, I knew I only had one choice to make: Compound the emergency. Creating a second problem was my only solution to the first one.

As a familiarization instructor at HT-8, my primary duty was to instruct student naval aviators in the art of helicopter flight from the ground up (no pun intended). To give new students the best training possible and to minimize a student’s time out of the cockpit, fam

instructors generally fly during daylight hours. The day schedule sometimes lasts for months at a time. While a day cycle is good for the students, it’s bad for fam instructors’ nighttime proficiency.

I hadn’t flown at night in months before the evening of the near-miss. Knowing I had NATOPS minimums to meet, I sniveled for an instructor night flight to refamiliarize myself with the eastern instrument



# re—Almost

Photo by Matthew J. Thomas. Modified.

area. Assuming I would complete the night warmup, operations scheduled me to fly the next evening with an old fam student of mine. He would be flying his last training flight, and we were scheduled for a low-level GPS-ground navigation flight in the western instrument area (instead of the eastern area).

In addition to not having flown in the west for quite a while, being assigned a TH-57C at night complicated things even more: The charlie model is slightly different than the bravo model I flew as a fam instructor. The

charlie model, used primarily for night and instrument flights, has many more bells and whistles, such as GPS, ILS and extra circuit breakers. But, I felt comfortable.

As usual, the student and I briefed the route of flight. We identified all obstacles within several miles of our flight path, including a giant, flashing, 1,500-foot radio tower located two to three miles east of our track. The Notices to Airmen (NOTAMs) were checked. The weather briefer said the skies were overcast, with no moon illumination.

Off we went. We finished the preliminary Pensacola-hospital route by navigating to a nearby training airfield. We then began the low-level portion of the hop by heading north to the first low-level checkpoint at 1,000 feet MSL (800 feet AGL).

The winds were much stronger than forecast, and they blew us east of track, which caused difficulty keeping the course-deviation indicator (CDI) centered. The student navigated, using his annotated chart.

As we continued north, I felt we were a bit off course. Although the winds were a concern, my bigger worry was I couldn't see the flashing lights of the gigantic 1,500-foot tower I expected ahead and to the right. Either we had been blown way off course, or my student had plugged in an inaccurate GPS coordinate. I tasked my student to positively identify our location, using other towers in the area as reference points. Quickly, the student picked out towers near our route. And that's when he barked, "Sir! Break left! We're going to hit the tower!"

Despite the extremely dark night, we could see the tree-trunk silhouette of the tower looming ever larger in our windscreen—a much closer encounter than we wanted to witness. Within a split second of my student's order, I broke left and pulled collective to increase our altitude. The tower was an easy target to miss—I was more worried about the guy<sup>1</sup> wires. I was certain, any second, our aircraft would be sliced in half. As I pulled collective, I knew climbing was the only way to increase our chances of survival. As I pulled, I saw the torque light repeatedly flash.

I continued climbing left until we were above the tower, and then I turned northeast to NAS Whiting Field, our nearest safe-landing site. (Although Pensacola Regional was an option, we were equidistant from both airfields, and we elected to head home.)

I wasn't sure how much we had overtorqued, and, once we were safe from the guy wires, I finally realized how bad our emergency was. Normally, the copilot would reset the torque circuit breaker, so the gauge would display the overtorque percentage. But, this particular torque-reading system was new, and the circuit breaker was unlabelled in many of the charlie aircraft—including ours. Breaking out the NATOPS pocket checklist wouldn't help either; an interim change to the checklist hadn't yet been published. I knew both of us needed to be looking outside, so I decided to wait until we had landed to find the circuit breaker.

We approached Whiting at a reasonable speed, considering our overtorque situation. I contacted tower,

declared an emergency, and then flew to a safe spot abeam the active runway.

After landing, we located the torque circuit breaker and reset it (showing a close-to-record-breaking 134 percent). We quickly shut down, and, even before we stepped out, maintenance personnel were inspecting every square inch of the aircraft, trying to identify possible wire-strike damage.

After returning to the squadron spaces, I immediately rechecked the NOTAMS; I saw nothing about the tower's lights being inoperative. When I debriefed the command duty officer, I received a surprising confession: The regular night flyers knew the tower's lights had been inoperative (or intermittent at best) for several months; yet, no one had reported it to the FAA, nor had anyone alerted other pilots via an all-read board. (Subsequent investigation by the FAA revealed the equipment designed to alert the tower's owner that the lights were inoperative had malfunctioned.)

The next day, I briefed the safety officer of the collective "crime of omission" and our close call. He promptly took an aircraft out to the west to recon the tower. His debrief, in addition to my observations regarding the apparent nearness of the tower and our altitude, indicated—in all likelihood—our aircraft had flown between the guy wires.

In retrospect, there are several things we, as a crew, should have done to decrease the chances of hitting the wires. Once we confessed we were lost, we should have climbed to an altitude above the highest known obstacle. We should have been more vigilant and situationally aware, especially with my having been outside the night-training environment for a while. These simple suggestions could have helped avoid the several strands of gray hair I gained soon thereafter.

But, the most important requirement for anyone involved in aviation-related activities is to issue safety-of-flight information quickly and properly. Avoid turning a routine training flight into a one-way ticket from the crash site to the morgue.

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<sup>1</sup>The proper term is "guy" wires, not "guide" wires. *n.* guy A rope, chain, rod or wire attached to something to steady or guide.

*This crew got themselves into a dangerous situation where they had to make several decisions very quickly, including when and where to land, given the overtorque. NATOPS says to land as soon as possible.—Capt. Ed Shea, TH-57 analyst at the Naval Safety Center.*