

# Cross-Cockpit IMC Quick-Stop

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By Lt. Mike Jenkins and Lt. Dave Mullins

**T**he schedule had our HSL detachment participating in evening maritime-interdiction operations (MIO). We were to provide the SEAL-sniper platform for a full-mission profile of a simulated noncompliant boarding. For the helo crew, the idea behind the evolution was relatively simple. We were supposed to arrive in an 80-foot hover at a lateral range of 100 to 300 yards, as the SEAL team “hooks in” to the ship being boarded.

We didn’t want to arrive early because the helo’s noise could tip off the vessel’s crew, which could allow them time to prepare their defenses for the boarding team. We also didn’t want to arrive in position too late, because there would be no coverage for the first couple of SEALs boarding. The trick was to arrive at the same time as the RHIBs holding the SEALs. Then, after we were in position, all we had to do was stay there until the SEALs firmly had the situation under control, and we were released to return to our ship. Sounds simple enough, right?

We had discussed taking a couple of days to train properly: meaning step-by-step. We wanted to crawl before we walked. We initially wanted a daytime flight for each crew. We would get a solid visual reference, talk about everything we learned, and practice the

maneuvers at night. After completing the day-and-night practices, we were comfortable to support any full-mission-profile MIO boardings. Time constraints, however, thwarted our plan; we had one night to get the full-mission profile knocked out.

Our services were required from 0100 to 0400 in the morning—only one flight for our mighty speed. To compensate for the abbreviated timeline, we added a flight before the required one, and we would fly two aircraft commanders together, instead of a regular crew. At least we’d have two ACs qualified for MIO, instead of a HAC and an H2P. Having two qualified HACs also increased safety, considering the accelerated timeline. We thought we did a good job stacking the deck in our favor by figuring out the best way to support the mission, maximize the training, and do it as safely as possible.

The crew was set to be a lieutenant (the det’s MO) and myself (the det’s OpsO) up front, with our AW and two SEALs (one a sniper, the other a spotter) in the back. We briefed the plan for both flights. The first flight was to be a practice that consisted of at least three approaches to the port quarter of our ship, followed by three approaches to the starboard quarter. We would get a feel for what the approaches called for, and the crew could iron



Photo by Matthew J. Thomas. Modified.

out communications difficulties that inevitably arise between the SEALs and the helo guys. We also discussed the second flight; it was an extensive brief.

Afterward, our OinC sat us down and talked about what it is like for two ACs to fly together. The MO and I looked at each other in a mildly confused manner. The OinC had spoken to us from time to time regarding evolutions that required our close attention to make them go smoothly. We were a bit confused this time because, “Hey, we are two aircraft commanders. What could go wrong?”

The OinC mentioned how our natural tendency might be to feel safer than usual, which is true because of more experience in the cockpit. More experience always is better than less. At the same time, he noted that every bad spot he’d found himself in was with another HAC beside him. So, our sit-down chat was to reinforce the idea of, “Yes, this is a strong crew, but, at the same time, keep your guard up.”

What he said made sense, but I don’t know if I took it on board as I should have. I was

excited to fly, and we didn’t fly together too often. I looked forward to a break from having a knucklehead H2P next to me, making sure he didn’t kill us.

I signed for the aircraft, and I think this is where we made the first minor mistake. I never had flown a single flight with a sniper in my aircraft, while the MO had flown more than 10 noncompliant boardings on his last cruise. The reason I signed for the aircraft this time was because the MO had signed for it the last time we flew together. No more thought went into it than that; it wasn’t a big deal. It wasn’t as if we weren’t going to communicate effectively, but he should have signed for the aircraft because of his experience. I knew about the mission, too, but I had zero actual experience. I certainly was in the mindset of gleaning as much knowledge as possible from him during our flights together that night.

We launched uneventfully around 2130, knocked out our after-takeoff checks, put on our NVGs, and set up for our approaches. It was dark out, but we could see well on the goggles.

The illumination was supposed to be around 30 percent. The sky was partly cloudy at takeoff, so we weren't getting much light—but enough. At least, you could make out the horizon.

I sat in the right seat, and the MO was in the left. I had the controls when

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we started our approaches to the port side of our ship. We had talked about what the approaches should look like. Obviously, the approaches didn't call for breaking NATOPS limitations, or we would have discussed

another option.

The best way to describe what we were doing was a mild quick-stop to 80 feet, at a range of 100 to 300 yards.

All three approaches were uneventful. I did

note, however, on each approach, I had to pull more power to hover than I thought I'd need. No big deal—that's why we were out here practicing, right? After our third approach, we started approaches to the starboard side of the ship. Naturally, the two pilots up front swapped controls so the pilot closest to the ship would fly the approach. Or, if the crew needed the left seat pilot to perform a tactical function during the approach, we would have wanted to make our approach from the bow of the ship to the starboard side.

For the non-helo readers, all of the front-seat tactical functions are performed from the left seat of an SH-60B. However, before we had a chance to fly any starboard side approaches, we were pulled away and tasked to provide FLIR video of the ship the SEALs deployed from. We burned

the rest of that bag hovering next to the ship, instead of practicing more approaches. We sat in a hover with our FLIR on the ship that deployed the SEALs in their RHIBs until

we had to come back to the ship for our 0030 hot-pump.

The clouds rolled in, and the night got darker. By the time we were wheels down for our hot-pump, we still could make out a horizon on the goggles, but we saw nothing underneath the goggles. The MO said, “The windows and windscreen look like someone has spray painted them black.”

We were late launching because we were instructed not to get airborne until we had heard the predetermined code word. Well, we did get off, but late, and we should have had plenty of time to get into our initial loitering position. Some slop was built into the schedule of events to allow for unforeseen delays.

We rolled through the after-takeoff checks, then heard a code word go out that corresponded to an event that wasn't supposed to happen for at least another 15 minutes. Regardless, the SEAL RHIBs were in position and making their run on the simulated suspect vessel. I still was at the controls, so I dipped the nose and pulled in some power to get to where we needed to be a bit sooner. The MO asked where we were in the execution checklist.

There were two distinct code words that meant “go.” One word was for the SEALs in the RHIBs, and we had a different one that told us to get in position. We made it to another loiter position, closer to the suspect vessel, where we cut figure-eights in the sky at 500 feet while waiting for our “go” code word. Confusion on the checklist obviously was because the RHIBs showed up early.

It was apparent when the RHIBs got their code word to “go,” but someone forgot to tell us our code word. We asked about our word while we watched the RHIBs close the ship, but we maintained our standoff. We still didn't know from what side to conduct our approach. If the approach was from starboard, the option of coming around to the front disappeared as we watched the RHIB speed up the suspect vessel's wake. By this time, the last of the horizon on goggles disappeared—it was totally black outside—the inkwell existed not only to the naked eye, but also on NVGs. There was a bright dot in our world on NVGs, and it was the simulated-

suspect vessel's nav lights, which were all we could see.

We were very anxious because we didn't hear our call to go. We didn't want to be late in position, but, with every passing second that we didn't get our “go” code word, the severity of the maneuver to get into position on time increased. We finally got word what side the SEALs were going to climb aboard—you guessed it, starboard side. We quickly discussed swapping controls but decided to leave it in my hands.

My thought process to keep controls included four points:

First, one of the objectives of the operation was to maintain solid FLIR footage of the SEALs going up the side of the ship from our helo. Our AW had a tendency to stray from the task when he was operating the FLIR (he sometimes looked at what he wanted to look at, when he should have been looking at what we had decided he should be looking at). The MO would run the FLIR to make sure we got the footage we wanted. He couldn't do that and fly at the same time.

Second, I thought since the MO had done this mission before, he would say something if he didn't feel comfortable with my plan.

Third, I didn't realize the horizon completely had gone away; it did so relatively slowly.

Fourth, we had hovered less than an hour and a half ago on the last flight cross-cockpit, with little horizon, and didn't have a problem. Why should this event be any different?

The MO agreed with the first point of my thought process; he also agreed with my third and fourth points. We quickly briefed the plan and agreed that if I lost visual contact of the ship, and if anything didn't look good, then the MO would come on the controls and help out. The MO and I were preoccupied anticipating our “go” code word to get into position, and we didn't step back to give what we were about to do another sanity check.

When we finally got the word to go, I dumped the nose quite a bit toward the suspect ship and pulled in 100-percent torque to maintain our 500 feet—we rushed toward the ship. We watched the RHIBs on FLIR as they neared the ship. When I flared to slow down, I also lowered the collective

to start our descent and arrive at our pre-briefed 100-foot hover. The sniper then would move us as required, to go no lower than 80 feet. I scanned my radar altimeter, my artificial horizon, and the simulated-suspect vessel.

Because the approach was cross-cockpit, and the nose-up attitude was significant (sorry, no real data points on that, nothing crazy for day-time but stupid for this altitude, with no horizon on NVGs at nighttime), I lost sight of the ship. I sat up as high as possible and leaned forward to try to find the ship, while I told the MO that I had lost sight of it. He said we were at a safe distance, and I maintained my flare until I felt the shudder of translational lift disappearing.

I still was distracted because I couldn't see the ship. I also felt uncomfortable, knowing we were relatively close to it. I tried to scan the ship but had no luck, so I relied on the MO to give feedback for our clearance. My hover bars came alive, and I rocked the nose over and

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began to pull. I even reminded myself, "Hey, remember you need to pull more here than you think!" Boy, was I right!

I saw the radalt count down, 100, 80, 60 feet, and, with each tick it passed, I pulled more and more. I don't know exactly when the MO started to help me pull; I didn't feel him on the controls until it felt like we had started to climb again. I also thought he pulled in a bit more after I had stopped. The lowest altitude I saw was 40 feet, but the sniper thought we were as low as 10 feet. A ship observer, aboard the simulated-suspect vessel, also thought we were below 40 feet.

We climbed to 200 feet in a heartbeat and experienced the classic yaw to the right

associated with such a massive power pull. We momentarily saw some red-torque cubes. We quickly got things in order, then it was quiet for a while. We tried to hover on the starboard side, but communication difficulties with the SEALs, combined with the lack of horizon and our near-dip, proved too much to continue; we called it a night.

I'm not going to rehash everything that should have tipped us off to stop what we were doing. The whole experience felt surreal. What upset me the most was that I didn't stop the flight earlier. I pride myself on looking into the future and anticipating difficulties, identifying them, and fixing them or avoiding them. Our MO is the same way. I think flying with the MO and the respect I have for him as an aviator made me think we could overcome anything.

We did overcome some things—we did not crash the aircraft. Considering what we tried to do, I'd say that fact certainly is significant. The MO may have saved our butts; the altitude loss happened so fast I really couldn't say if his input made the difference or not. If I had been with an H2P, and we had been setting up to do an IMC cross-cockpit, quick-stop to the back of a ship at 80 feet, I know I would have said, "No, I don't think so. Let's try to think of something sane to do instead."

We laughed at the debrief like frightened children might do after getting away with something. I thanked the OinC for having that chat with us and told him I now knew what he meant when he said two HACs quickly can get themselves into a mess. The good news is they probably can get their butts out of it quickly too—let's not test that theory, though.

We asked too much of ourselves and could have had more trust in our AW. We could have emphasized to him the importance of keeping the FLIR on the SEALs.

The OinC also said, "When you start to fly, your comfort zone is small. As you learn and start to find the boundaries, then your comfort zone grows and grows until you scare yourself; then, it shrinks a little. At that point, you are a safe, solid and good aviator." 

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