

# Double Flameout OR How to Ruin a Box Lunch



June 1983

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I was eating my apple when it happened—a loud bang aft. At the same time, both engines of our H-46 *Sea Knight* were winding down. The HAC immediately entered an autorotation and turned toward the beach, approximately two miles away. What was going on?

I was the copilot with 60 hours in model, while the HAC had around 13 years flying in the Navy, a mismatch to say the least. We'd just dropped a high-ranking admiral off at a nearby Air Force base and were returning to USS *Ship*.

Being a good copilot and of obviously lesser rank (LTJG to CDR), I'd flown our aircraft while the commander ate his box lunch first.

After approximately 40 minutes we switched control, and my turn for lunch arrived. The visibility was not very good, and the HAC instructed me to keep a good lookout for other aircraft.

That's when we had our double flameout at 1,100 feet. I quickly forgot about my box lunch.

The HAC asked for power management system off and yelled for a restart. I did the first, but the second command was confusing. I hadn't had a chance to look at the gauges yet and took time now to do so. The engines had indeed quit, and I watched the rotor RPM decrease and stop at around 70 to 80 percent. I took this as a hint and attempted several restarts. The whole event didn't seem real, and how could it? I was just sitting there eating lunch a few seconds ago, right? In 20 to 30 seconds, the aircraft went from 1,100 feet to a splash. Before impact, I looked up from my last engine restart attempt and could see the pilot was well in control of the aircraft. This reduced my worries somewhat.

We hit the water with a little forward airspeed,

and I was immediately under water. The aircraft broke apart at station 410 and the aft transmission, blades and engines went their own separate way. The forward section rolled right and became inverted, just barely floating. All inside were now underwater. After the pressure stopped holding me down, I was surprised to find myself still in my seat. I'd felt as if I'd been thrown through the front window. Visibility underwater was near zero. My only thought was to escape.

I found my lap belt easily because I wasn't wearing flight gloves. I had removed the gloves, not because this was an overwater flight and I had the option according to 3710.7K, but because I'd been eating lunch 30 seconds earlier and didn't want hydraulic and engine oil mingling with my food.

Before releasing my lap belt, I stopped and remembered that I needed to find a reference point, something I'd remembered from my training in the helo dunker (9D5).

Reaching for the door, I found it wasn't there. I may have released it already, I don't know. That was my last thought before impacting the water. I finally located the door frame with my right hand, released the lap belt with my left hand, and, using both hands, was successful in pulling myself out of the seat and clear of the aircraft.

Swimming toward a light above, I popped to the surface and found myself bouncing off the aircraft and looking at the nose wheel. I pushed off with my feet and started swimming away (mild panic)



while spitting out pieces of the apple I'd been eating for lunch. I checked the pieces carefully, because I first thought I was spitting out my own teeth.

Around 10 feet away from the aircraft, I stopped swimming and my head went underwater. I took this as another big hint and decided to inflate my LPA. One-half worked as advertised; the other did not. The current then pulled me farther away. Two other crewmembers surfaced, but one did not. One crewman swam back to the aircraft to look for the missing man but the current quickly pulled him away. The aircraft was lost, but worse, one life was lost at sea.

#### **Lessons Learned.**

- The helo dunker training works. It cannot duplicate the water impact but everything else was very close to the real thing.
- The left set of beads was not pulled on my LPA; my fault, sorry.
- If box lunches are served, make sure one pilot still has control of the aircraft and both are not eating at the same time. We ate separately; had we not done this, who knows what might have happened.

- I tried to use my PRC-90 and call for help. When the rescue helo arrived, I let go of it and watched it sink from sight. I then remembered three hours earlier when putting the radio in my vest I had told myself, "If I need the radio I'll just tie it on the vest after I get it out." Luckily, I didn't need the radio again, but what if we'd been 20 miles out at sea rather than close to shore and help was not so quick?

The aft section with the engines and aft transmission was not found and no definite cause could be determined. No lesson here.

My attitude about accidents has changed since my mishap. "Why not me" actually became "me." It would be easy to say "Well I've had mine," and go on, but that would be the easy way out. "Why not me, again?" is possible, but that does not seem original and sounds more like a sequel. The whys will always be there in naval aviation. After all, human and mechanical errors are hard to eliminate completely. Why not do all we can to keep the statistics low? I doubt if the questions will ever end, but hope certainly cannot end as we press toward that zero mishap rate. ◀

