



*Where'd That Frigate Come From?

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by LCdr. Randy Nash

We were two days from a port visit in New Orleans during Mardi Gras, halfway through our deployment with the NATO Standing Naval Forces Atlantic (SNFL). After the previous port, this underway period was a welcome break for our livers, yet everyone was looking forward to meeting with the other wardrooms at the world's largest week-long party.

SNFL was conducting a stricken-vessel exercise with the British ship simulating a main-space fire and the other vessels providing assistance. We were the Alert-30 SH-60B, standing by for any vertrep or medevac requirements. We thoroughly briefed NATOPS, covering the basics of vertrep to and from the different ships in the force. Unsure of any specific tasking, we talked extensively about how we would apply ORM. The weather couldn't have been better: clear skies, calm seas and light winds. We were stoked for what looked to be a fun hop.

Sure enough, we got the call to launch for both vertrep and medevac. Once airborne, we checked in with all the players. The Brits were DIW, with our FFG and a Dutch frigate maneuvering close aboard for RHIB ops. The ships were talking on bridge-to-bridge, but with Hawklink in one ear and helo common in the other, we decided not to monitor.

We took one load of DC gear over to the Brits and ran simulated burn victims back and forth. In between, we made low, close-aboard passes on the other ships to get a better look and take pictures.

The British were eventually "saved," finex called, and we were tasked to retrieve the DC gear we had dropped earlier. The British HCO said the load was ready, called the winds off the port beam, and gave us a green deck. We rolled on final from the starboard side and set up a hover over the deck. My H2P was in the right seat with the visual reference to the deck, hangar, and superstructure. My attention was focused right (cross cockpit), monitoring my copilot's hover, while the crewman was in the right side door, conning us over the load. Everything was working great.

"Hook-up man coming under," we called.

"Load's hooked up. Hook-up man clear," the crewman soon reported.

"Easy up, easy up, weight's coming on."

"Load's off the deck, easy up."

I called, "OK, gauges looking good, we're clear aro...what the..! Steady! Hold your position!"

Unbeknownst to us, while we were hovering over the British flight deck, the Dutch frigate had begun an approach up the port side at approximately 50 yards. When we shifted our attention forward, all we saw was gray-metal superstructure. If we transitioned, we'd deliver our SH-60B and the load of fire hoses, OBAs, and P-100s right onto their bridgewing.

Hearing the start of my aborted "clear" call, the H2P started drifting forward to transition to forward flight. Upon seeing all that gray and hearing the last half of my call, he steadied us out and started a slow turn to the left. The crewman called the load steady as we passed between the two ships with no more than a rotor's clearance on either side. I continued calling torque, airspeed, and altitude as he threaded the needle. Once clear and above single-engine airspeed, we breathed a big sigh of relief and actually started to laugh. We dropped the load off on mother and recovered shortly after.

So what would I do differently today? Can you say, "situational awareness?" The entire crew was task-fixated on a steady hover and getting the load hooked up. While I was monitoring the gauges, altitude, and position over the deck, I did not look ahead or left until it was time to be on the go. One quick glance to the left would have given me all the SA I needed. I could also have monitored bridge-to-bridge, instead of Hawklink, which might have clued me in on the Dutch intentions. Why didn't the British HCO warn us? Doesn't matter. You can't depend on others for your own clearance. In any case, we got a very valuable lesson at a cheap price. I'll never again start to call "clear around" until I know for sure that we are. And I'll never again assume an obstacle won't suddenly appear out of nowhere, even in the middle of GOMEX, with the nearest land over 200 nm away. 🛩️

LCdr. Nash flies with HSL-42.