

From the Past

by Lt. Werner Rauchenstein

I was about to fly my last NATOPS check, and I was ready to go. I had more than 1,000 hours in the SH-60B and plenty of sea time. I was always a little nervous on these check rides, but who isn't? I'd flown with this guy once on my HAC check a year ago almost to the day, and I'd deployed with him as his detachment maintenance officer. I knew the aircraft, the area, and most importantly, I knew him...or so I thought.

My HAC check had gone well. We had covered everything either of us could think of, including a few that I hadn't anticipated, and I hadn't made any major mistakes.

One emergency the check pilot threw at me was scary. We were doing practice auto-rotations to the pad. I wasn't doing very well, but they were passable. After getting established into the last one, he pulled the No. 2 engine back on me, putting us into a single engine profile. I waved off, thinking,



PH3 Bolden

“What the hell are you doing?” Trying to recover an auto with only one engine would be foolish, right? The flight finished off without further incident, and I discussed it with him afterwards.

After explaining that I was uncomfortable with that procedure, he replied, “I was watching you. I would’ve backed you up.” He then asked me how I recognized the failure, and I told him I saw him do it in my peripheral vision. He said, “I guess I should have been more stealthy.” His comment left me thinking he wanted me to complete the practice auto, probably for the “learning experience” more than for evaluation.

Now, less comfortable than I’d been before talking to him, I went to my current det OinC and explained the situation to him. He referred me to the safety officer, who told me that it didn’t sound like a good idea, but he didn’t know of any prohibitions on the procedure. In fact, he said, it was common practice in other LAMPS squadrons.

It was hard to digest this information, but I trusted the senior members of my command, and tried to be open to the idea that a practice single-engine auto was not a big deal. After all, I’d seen single-engine cut from 100 feet and in greased-on landings. Why not one from 50 or 60 feet at the end of an auto?

All this was running through my mind as we mounted up for my NATOPS check flight, but I was ready to go. Starting up the No. 1 engine, the

plane captain gave me the fire signal, so I aborted the start and went through the procedures. In the process, I noticed that the power control lever (PCL) was sticking badly in the down position. You have to pull down the PCL (which is mounted overhead) to turn off the starter and disengage the idle detent to abort the start. The problem with the PCL sticking is that it may miss the detent when accelerating the engine to the fly position. This situation could result in locking out the ECU, removing the automatic engine-trimming functions, or (if someone pulls it back to simulate single-engine failure) becoming a real engine failure.

As the flight proceeded, everything was going well. I was a little unnerved when he pulled back the No. 1 engine passing 100 feet on an obstacle-clearance takeoff (climbing hover) because we weren’t over a runway. Our wing SOP specifies that we must have the ability to “run it on” when practicing single engine from a 100-foot hover. I recovered to level, forward flight by about 50 feet, so I let it go. I definitely did not want to focus on anything but the present, since getting behind the aircraft on a check flight is a bad idea.

A little later, while practicing hover work, he gave me another cut-gun. Although I landed successfully, this time when he pulled the PCL back, it missed the idle detent and actually shut down the engine. We were on deck and restarted, so no problem, right?

By the end of the flight, I was feeling good. I had fended off the most off-the-wall emergencies I had seen, while reciting NATOPS minutiae for two and a half hours, and hadn’t hung myself yet. All that remained were autos. For some strange reason, even though I’d been thinking about it for the entire year and most of that flight, the thought of him pulling one engine back while we were in

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an auto did not even occur to me...until he did. I didn't see him do it this time, I just watched the No. 1 power-turbine speed and turbine-gas temperature drop down. I said, "Looks like number one has low-sided."

"Good catch, simulated failure," he replied.

I said, "Roger," and thought, "Well, I expected this, right? He'll back me up, right? Everyone I talked to said this is no big deal, right?"

As I started flaring at the bottom to 35 degrees, nose up, he realized that I wasn't going to wave off, and he ran the engine back up to give us the extra power we'd need in about two seconds. Rock and pull.

He said, "We're gonna hit!"

I said, "I've got it!" and I did, thanks to the power from the other engine. If he hadn't run the No. 1 back up, we probably would have landed hard and could have broken the aircraft. It turned out to be one of the best autos I have ever done, with zero forward airspeed, and a perfectly level and aligned helicopter at the bottom. Would that have been enough to prevent serious damage, injury or death? Perhaps, but I didn't want to find out, and I'm really glad that we didn't find out then. Even if we had, we would have come down on a pad where landing is prohibited (though hovering is not) because of possible damage to the pad's structure.

After the evaluator finished yelling at me, I explained that we had done this once before, and I had asked him about it afterwards. He remembered, and when I told him that I thought I had done the "wrong" thing in waving off last year (not wrong, just not what he wanted), he told me that I had misunderstood him. After a couple of professional expletives, we both laughed with relief and called it a day.

This misunderstanding could've cost us, and the Navy, a lot, and we had avoided a disaster with a bit of skillful flying on my part and quick reactions on his part. Hard to feel good about it, but I learned a lot that day.

If something happens that has made you cringe, even just a little, never accept anything but a complete and thorough explanation or description. Never allow it in your aircraft until you're completely satisfied with that answer. Even if it is a check flight, you have the right to say, "Hell, no, we're not going to do that!" If you are sure about something, but then are made to feel you know nothing, find out why.

And finally, don't forget operational risk management. All I had to do was bring this up in the NATOPS brief before the flight, and I'm sure it would have been resolved right then and there. 

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vertigo, since we were so low and still so far from the ship's stern.

We recovered quickly, discussed the incident briefly, and got back in the game. The darkness bred disorientation, and the HAC later repaid the favor when I had a healthy case of the leans. Well-established in the air boss's uncomfortable pattern, the HAC repeatedly pleaded for a "more efficient pattern." We asked to take care of one ship at a time to avoid all the problems I just outlined. I recall wanting to further comment about the position of the lone FA-18 parked so that it was almost impossible not to overfly. Every attempt to streamline the pattern was rejected. I thought we should be saying something other than "inefficient," but we didn't.

The night continued with near-misses with the other H-46 from the T-AFS. We pleaded to the tower for better "efficiency." With each pass, we questioned the operation more and more. I wanted to say something else, but I didn't. Meanwhile, the mini-boss kept refining his wishes.

"Sideflare, drop that load ... more right ... you have a fouled load ... retro to the left." This put the radio traffic at an intense level for daytime work, let alone a night like this. The noise added another degree of required "flexibility." Of course, the pilot at the controls, with radio mixer-switches down in order to hear our crewman's calls, was not privy to the tower's suggestions, so it all had to be back-briefed. I sat silently during one refueling, resenting that as an H2P, I had to study all those publications that set the requirements for night vertrep, which detail efficient and safe patterns, warn against excessive radio traffic, quantify the proper ship distances, and delineate discretion for night vertrep. I saw none of it put into practice that night.

We finished the operation that night as if "no" was not in our vocabulary. I was glad it was over. Throughout the mission, I wondered, "Before how many aviation mishaps did the crew feel uncomfortable just like this?" I wondered, yet I never said a thing. I spoke up during the debrief, but by then, it was easy.

In the story, the boy in the midst of crowds, royalty, and pressure had the courage to go against everything taught and say, "The emperor has no clothes." One of us in the aircraft that night should have said the publications are there for a reason. We should have overcome the fear of speaking up against the powers that be. We should have said something other than that this vertrep operation was "inefficient." 

Lt. Amaral flies with HC-11.