

Sonobuoys: Friend *OR* Foe?

By AW2 Matthew Connell

The morning flight in the Philippine Sea started out like any other. As an aviation-warfare operator (AW) in the back of our SH-60B, I kept a solid radar picture for our battle group, as the sun came over the horizon. Although we flew as much as possible, the crews on board the mighty warship, a frigate, soaked up the flight time and got plenty of rest in between.

Not a single person complained about the abundance of tasking, because we all loved to fly. Despite all this flight time, I felt airsick on one flight, and I couldn't understand why. As a sensor operator, with well over 500 hours in the back of a helicopter, off the smallest LAMPS-capable ship in Navy, the last thing I expected to be was nauseated. We hadn't been in a port for a week, so I knew it wasn't the good life getting me down.

A little embarrassed about the situation, I kept my mouth shut and sat in the back, doing my job. This was a typical tactical flight: Nothing was happening. We carried a standard loadout of sonobuoys in our launcher, in case we came across Red October. To break up the

monotony, our ship had scheduled a gun shoot for that morning. After we cleared the range, we moved to mom's starboard side to get a good seat for the show.

Even the fun of watching the frigate fire her guns did not help my airsickness. I opened the small scupper in my window and hoped the fresh air would help the queasiness in my stomach. As the fresh air hit me, I licked my lips. Not so fortunate, only to learn what it tastes like to lick a car battery fresh out of the box. Luckily, I also remembered the lessons I learned in the training squadron. I recalled an instructor telling me that a venting sonobuoy lithium battery tasted metallic.

The time for pride was gone, and I told the pilots about the situation. After I described the indications, both pilots admitted to smelling something different. This made sense, because all the air from the aft part of the cabin eventually makes it to the cockpit.

We had started our emergency procedures, which included jettisoning all buoys in the launcher, when I became violently ill. I began to experience the typical symptoms: nausea, lightheadedness and coughing.

"No problem," I thought, "All the sonobuoys are gone, problem solved."

We slowed to 60 knots, so I could open the cabin door and get a much larger dose of wonderfully fresh air. As I settled into my seat, I did not feel any better. Turning around, I shouted many expletives as I noticed two DICASS sonobuoys remained in their chutes. The pilot turned around and saw I was not in my seat about the





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same time the copilot called for the hung-sonobuoy procedures. I had to select each buoy in the launcher. Unfortunately, I felt the cabin door needed more attention because, as the pilot noticed in his rearview mirror, I was vomiting upside down, held in by the gunner's belt. Quick thinking by the copilot and an even quicker hand sent the two sonobuoys careening out the launcher as he again hit the "All Stores Jettison" button.

I obviously was not feeling good enough to continue operating the equipment. Some would say I was incapacitated as we called for emergency-flight quarters. We were on deck in eight minutes. The emergency-medical crew escorted me to sick call because I wasn't able to walk under my own power. Thanks to some pure oxygen, I recovered fully and was back in a flying status within 24 hours.

The severity of my airsickness could have been avoided if I had spoken up sooner. In our NATOPS briefs, we always talk about if any crew member "feels, hears, sees, or smells anything different," they should speak up. I suggest we add taste to that list.

Both pilots admitted to smelling something unusual. I felt airsick, which definitely is out of the ordinary. If any three of us would have spoken up about what we were feeling or smelling, the problem may have not become so severe. In a worst-case scenario, pride would have overcome me, while the lithium could have overcome the whole crew. Thanks to good aircrew coordination, we correctly identified the problem, executed the emergency procedure, and adapted to overcome the situation, even though things didn't happen perfectly. It was an experience I never will forget. 🦅

AW2 Connell flies with HSL-51 Det 1.