

# Deadly

by Ltjg. Matt Sheflin

**T**his adventure takes place off the coast of Mexico. I was returning from another SSC mission that was part of the ongoing search for drug smugglers. As usual, we were working through another horizonless, dark-as-anything night. I felt prepared for standard mission tasking, but I wasn't prepared for what was about to happen. My "routine" landing after the mission was mere inches from becoming a Class A mishap.

I was the H2P (flying left seat), and the HAC was at the controls in the right seat. I had been flying the SH-60B for a year and had logged more than 150 hours in model. The HAC had more than 2,000 hours in model. He gave me the approach and landing back at the ship to update my currency. After I completed the landing checks, we swapped controls for one approach and two free deck bounces into the rapid-securing device.

**We had come no more than a foot from striking the top of the superstructure...**

# Drift

Shortly after gaining visual contact with the ship, we were given a green deck and were cleared for landing. The approach was a bit hot and a little high on the perch but nothing too unusual for a no-horizon night. As we made our approach to the fantail, the Senso came on the ICS and reported a problem with the messenger cable. When he had lowered the RAST probe, the messenger cable had begun to pay out, and he couldn't retrieve it electrically. It was now dangling below the aircraft, with the end somewhere on the deck below. As we hovered over the deck, the Senso told us he was going to try to retrieve the messenger by hand, in order to prevent the cable from tangling in the nets.

As he began to manually haul in the cable, the LSO came up on the radio and informed us that the light on our RAST probe wasn't on, and he couldn't see the messenger cable. The HAC asked if I had remembered to turn on the RAST light. To my amazement, I discovered that I had missed it on the landing checklist.

As we hovered over the deck, the HAC called for a swap of the controls, so that I could reach the RAST light switch, which is located on the left side of the cockpit. After the HAC took the controls, I began to concentrate on the overhead console, fumbling for the switch. During small-deck RAST landings, the pilot who isn't at the controls is responsible for backing up the flying pilot by scanning the deck for fore and aft drift. Hash marks on the flight deck help the non-flying pilot do this. In addition, there is a second set of hash marks the Senso can use to help judge fore and aft alignment.

At this point, the Senso and I were distracted, and neither of us were concentrating on backing up the flying pilot. It didn't seem to take more than two seconds to look up to locate the switch and

then focus my attention outside, but it was more than long enough to begin a potentially disastrous drift toward the hangar. The only thing that I remember after looking back outside was seeing the top of the SPY radar antenna and the top portion of the hangar through the chin bubble. I told the HAC, "We need to come aft."

We had come no more than a foot from striking the top of the superstructure—too close for comfort. If we had actually struck the superstructure while hovering over the LSO shack, our loss of situational awareness might have killed not only the four people in the aircraft, but also those in the LSO shack and possibly a few in the hangar.

During the debrief, we determined that the HAC may have had vertigo but didn't recognize it until it was almost too late. He said that he had detected forward drift and had put in what he perceived as enough aft cyclic to correct the problem, but the drift had continued. By the time he made the second input, we had drifted to within a foot of disaster.

We had allowed a classic chain of events to develop unchecked. Our crew coordination and situational awareness had broken down, making the hazard of vertigo even more severe. We use ACT techniques when landing on a small boy, but in this case, a chain of events distracted the aircrew. The result was a loss of SA by the copilot and Senso that, when combined with the flying pilot's vertigo, nearly sealed the deal for us. Lack of attention to detail when completing the landing checklist was the first link in the mishap chain. Had the RAST light been on when we crossed the deck edge, I would not have been fumbling for the switch, and a swap of controls would not have been necessary. 

Ltjg. Sheflin flies with HSL-47, Det. 2.