

No, I Didn't Say

by Lt. Matt Niedzwiecki

Flying H-46s on Guam has plenty of advantages. For one thing, you get lots of SAR. The island, 30 miles long and 8 miles wide, is a tropical paradise, located along the Marianas Trench in the western Pacific. It is a major vacation spot for people from Japan and other Asia-Pacific countries. Unfortunately, tourists do not understand the dangers associated with the waters surrounding the island. The strong currents and dangerous reefs kill people every year.

As the only airborne asset on Guam, HC-5 is tasked to assist the Coast Guard in SAR operations. Our squadron has a designated SAR crew 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Traditionally, during a three-year tour, pilots will execute numerous searches and rescue at least one person.

Once, when I was on the designated SAR crew, Operations had assigned us a two-hour, day, NATOPS familiarization flight. We practiced a benign SAR scenario and multiple emergencies. After hot-seating out of the aircraft, my crew was walking through maintenance when the Coast Guard called. The initial report was that two Marine Corps safety boats had overturned near the reefs just over the cliffs from our squadron, and five personnel were unaccounted for.

Our crew ran to the still-turning aircraft and hot-seated back in. Another of our squadron aircraft was arriving on scene and commencing the search. We held a quick SAR brief for the crew to bring everyone up to speed and quickly departed over the cliff. We were on scene within minutes.

We talked to our counterparts in the other helicopter. They had spotted the two overturned boats, with five personnel clinging to them, dangerously close to the breakwater. The two boats were about 200 yards apart. Both helos moved in for the rescues.

We dropped our SAR swimmer next to one boat. Within five minutes, we repositioned the

aircraft for the first pickup. The first Marine had a head contusion with some minor bleeding. The remaining Marines were uninjured; we hoisted them into the aircraft. All that remained was to retrieve the SAR swimmer.

I felt great about getting my first rescue. All that was left was to finish hoisting the swimmer and make a beeline for the naval hospital. With the swimmer just 10 feet below the door, the transmission chip light on the master caution panel illuminated. Time seemed to stop for a second. An ICS call warning the crew of the light resulted in multiple "Did you say 'simulated'?" responses. A quick "No!" set the wheels in motion. With no initial secondaries, the pilot at the controls began a slow climb to get over the cliff and return to Andersen AFB. The swimmer was quickly hauled inside, and the Marines on board could only think, "This just isn't my day."

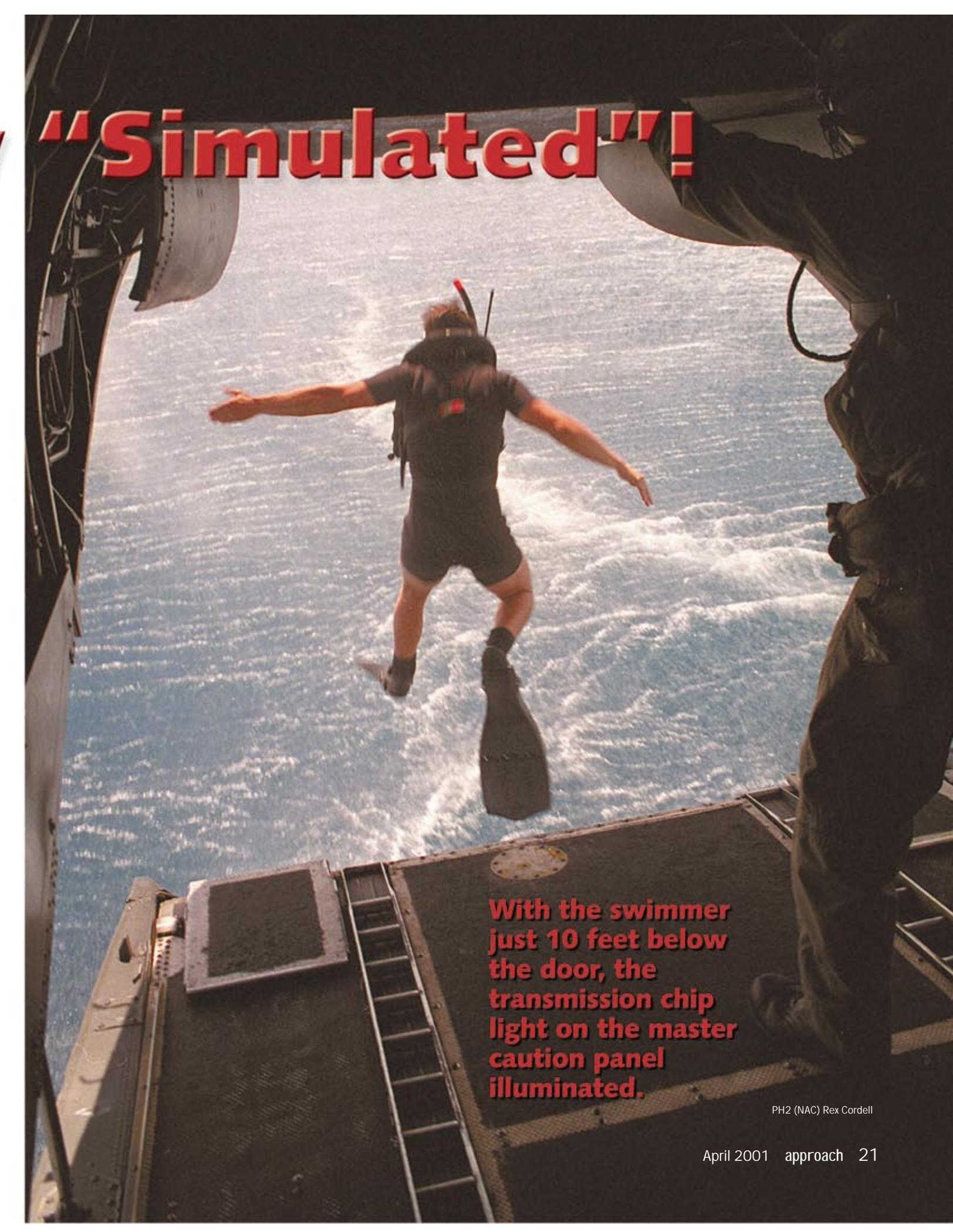
The aircraft was safe on deck within minutes of declaring the emergency, and all the Marines kissed the ground before they climbed into the awaiting ambulances.

After sitting in the quiet aircraft for a minute, one of the crewman said, "Sir, I'm glad we had practiced the imminent transmission failure on our fam flight earlier today." I couldn't have agreed more.

I'm sure that my crew could have safely returned the aircraft during any emergency procedure, but the confidence that is gained from practicing simulated emergencies is more valuable than just memorizing emergency procedures. Creating operational scenarios inside the aircraft is beneficial for old and new pilots alike.

Although we didn't see any secondaries during the emergency, the chip light had done its duty. Maintainers found numerous metal particles in the aft transmission, which they removed. 

Lt. Niedzwiecki flies with HC-5.



“Simulated”!

With the swimmer just 10 feet below the door, the transmission chip light on the master caution panel illuminated.

PH2 (NAC) Rex Cordell