

By Lt. Matt Mason

Going MAD

Although the SH-60B is a great aircraft, very reliable and a joy to fly, it is still a helicopter. The question isn't if, but when, a serious emergency is going to happen. As a LAMPS Mk-III helicopter aircraft commander (HAC), I always wondered when it would be my turn in the barrel for one of those there-I-was emergencies. I had my fair share of flashing master-caution lights and minor-emergency procedures, but my helo career was uneventful until midway through my second WestPac deployment on a small boy.

My ship was a *Kidd*-class destroyer, operating in the Northern Arabian Gulf in support of UN sanctions against Iraq. The ship and crew had become a finely tuned war machine. Approaching a thousand hours in model and having all my quals, I was comfortable with the aircraft and single-deck shipboard operations. Our squadron detachment worked smoothly with the

ship and contributed to battle-group operations. We patrolled the northern Gulf for suspicious surface vessels. Chasing down date-filled dhows and oil-filled cargo ships was routine, and we were good at it. Best of all, our out-chop from the Gulf was just around the corner.

My crew and I were scheduled for a late-night surface search mission, so during the day, I had the standard sleep-in, workout, and paperwork drill before the brief. The helicopter second pilot (H2P) had above-average aviation skills and was progressing rapidly toward her HAC qualification. It was my job, along with the other HACs, to ensure she would be ready for her

Photo by PH2 Dennis Cantrell
Photo-composite by John W. Williams

HAC board at the end of deployment. I told her it was her hop: She would run the mission from the get-go.

The weather looked good, but the moon wasn't very bright. We'd have to return to a ship that didn't have standard LAMPS deck lighting. We reviewed the maintenance book and were told the reeling machine for the towed, magnetic anomaly detector (referred to as the MAD bird) had been replaced. The reeling machine allows the MAD bird to be extended in flight to 200 feet. Maintenance asked us to do an in-flight evaluation of the unit. After the usual preflight night scare on the flight deck, we strapped in, lit the fires, and engaged the head. Tower passed us a green deck, and we were off into the velvet blackness.

For the first hour, we were busy passing contacts to home plate. The H2P reminded me about testing the reeling machine, and the junior aircrewman in back, an antisubmarine warfare petty officer (AW3), concurred. I took control of the aircraft and gave the go-ahead for operation of the MAD bird. I flew straight, level and within airspeed parameters for deploying the MAD. Then came a string of expletives from the back.

My brain went into high PRF, as I scanned the instruments for a malfunction.

"Sir, we have a problem," crackled over the ICS. It was the AW3. I asked what the problem was and received the standard, "Stand by," followed by a momentary pause that seemed like an eternity. Finally, he replied, "Sir, it's just a hung MAD bird." I needed more information. I cleared the AW to secure himself with the gunner's belt and open the cabin door to visually check the MAD. He verified the MAD bird was 40 feet in trail of the aircraft. The reeling machine had hung up during extension.

This is where crew coordination came into play. We decided, as a crew, to reel the MAD back in. If any problems arose, we would stop and consider other options.

The initial attempt to retract the MAD bird failed, and the AW turned off the reel switch. We had two options. One was to pickle the bird near the ship and attempt to salvage it with the ship's rigid-hull inflatable boat (RHIB). This option was discussed with ship personnel. If it had been day VMC, this would have been the optimal choice, but night operations pose hazards that make a RHIB ride a sporty event. A choppy sea and the possibility of losing sight of the MAD bird made this option a poor choice.

Our second option was to bring the aircraft into a high hover over the ship and pickle the MAD bird over the flight deck. Option two was riskier. The flight deck did not have all the handy-dandy lighting that LAMPS Mk-III capable

ships have. There isn't a gyro-stabilized heading-attitude-reference system (HARS) bar, which stabilizes a hover over the flight deck. We didn't even have a landing signal officer.

I had to establish a steady, high hover over the deck without visual aids. The plan was simple: We would use crew coordination to reduce our risk. I would fly in on a higher-than-normal approach, and AW3 would ensure MAD cleared the fantail. When steady in a hover, I would lower the aircraft until the MAD bird was on deck. When AW3 informed the cockpit the MAD was on deck, H2P would hit the magic pickle button. Easy!

As we approached the ship, I told my OinC about the plan. He agreed, offered some helpful insight for setting aircraft lighting, and worked on getting favorable winds from the ship.

I ensured the AW knew the calls to make, and I instructed the H2P to back me up on the approach. We rolled onto final and received a green deck from tower. I hovered considerably higher than normal, so high the only visible cue I had was the mast of the ship swaying back and forth. That is when I realized I accounted only for winds behind the hangar. The winds above the hangar and around the mast were more turbulent.

Normally, hovering this aircraft is easy. It almost can be done hands-off—but not this time. I felt like I was on fam-1 at Spencer Field in the TH-57B. Fighting the winds and the aircraft, my calm voice became that of a screaming T-34C IP. I could feel a sense of urgency from the ship's captain (who was monitoring the evolution via the flight-deck camera). I needed to know where the MAD bird was, and I needed that info yesterday. As calm as he could be, AW3 said, "Easy with it" and gave clearance to pickle. H2P gave a quick three-two-one count and hit the button. Once the cable sheared, the rotorwash blew the MAD bird onto one of the flight-deck-edge nets (I hadn't thought about that). I visually cleared the airplane and waved off to set up another approach for landing.

We shut down, debriefed and met with all the players on the ship to discuss our decisions and execution. Were there any alternatives that might have entailed less risk? Second-guessing decisions made in the air, whether yours or another aircrew's, has been happening since Orville and Wilbur flipped the coin. We had worked well as a crew; after all, that's how we train. Our aircrew meshed well with the ships' crew, who helped us identify the risks in our options and provided the expertise to mitigate the risks of the option we chose.



Lt. Mason is a former SH-60B pilot who recently transitioned to the EA-6B and flies with VAQ-142.