

That's Not  
a Boat,



That's an

By Ltjg. Ryan Phillips

**W**e were flying a night SAR for an LHD off the West Coast. It was the fifth hour of the exercise, and we were in low-light conditions. We wanted to get our unaided qualifications, so we didn't use night-vision goggles. The Marine helicopter crews, who were using goggles, were completing their flights and heading home.

The water, 300 feet below, was unseasonably glassy, which made it hard to separate aircraft from watercraft. To make matters worse, the navigation lights from the boats reflected off the water, creating two of every light on board.

I was at the controls, and our aircraft was dead silent, except for the occasional clearing calls to the right. Monotony and exhaustion were affecting us all. As the Marines returned and pushed to their primary frequency, our crew listened and tried to pinpoint their location, since we were flying between the LZ and the boat. We heard a Marine H-46 report five miles off the starboard quarter. We were two miles on the outbound leg from the starboard bow. The inbound aircraft was expected to conform to the delta pattern, which would have given us a clearance of about six miles. We assumed that, with our anti-collision lights on, they could see us from 30 miles away and have plenty of time to avoid us. We maintained our thousand-yard stares into darkness.

I began to focus on a dim red light. I figured it had to be a couple of miles away, so I began to cross-check it with other images I had seen all night. I thought, "Is this another boat on the water, or could it be an aircraft?" I looked for the telltale sign of the boat's navigation lights reflecting off the water, but I never saw it. I called out the traffic to other crew members, so they could help identify the light. It remained motionless, and the crew was having difficulty spotting it.

Before anyone else found the dim light, I began to notice our dark surroundings becoming a shade darker directly in front of us. Then, in a hair-raising split second, my instincts reacted with an armpit full of collective and a left knee full of cyclic. We pulled up and to the left just as a Marine H-46 silhouette nosed down and to the right of us.

We were so close we could identify the aircraft on a black-on-black night. I was angered at having been surprised. I don't ever want to recreate the split second of terror that overwhelmed me. It would never have happened had we not taken some things for granted and lost our situational awareness. 

Ltjg. Phillips flies with HC-11.

# H-46

Photo illustration by Yvonne Dawson