# My Peter Cain Overnighter

By LCdr. Larry Vincent

It was a beautiful day in the desert, west of the Colorado River, and I was the instructor for a low-level training flight in an H-60. The student pilot was an experienced Cat II, and both of the aircrewmen were FRS instructors. In short, it was one of those days where I would pay the Navy to let me fly.

Most of the routine maneuvers had been completed, and we were moving onto the confined-area landings. I picked out an LZ near Peter Cain Water Hole, and we did a sweep check, looking for anything that might jeopardize a safe landing. The zone appeared tight but workable, and the crewmen agreed we should set up for an approach. We came into a hover while my crewmen cleared me on both sides and aft. I looked right but wasn't comfortable with the distance between my rotors and the trees. I held my hover and asked the gunner again to check the clearance. My right gunner was a good crewman—experienced, with a solid reputation. He assured me I was OK, and I began to descend.

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I pulled collective and looked right. The trees were moving from the rotor wash, and I decided it was time to find a new LZ.

As we transitioned toward a different part of the working area, my left gunner asked if anyone else heard a "whistling sound" coming from the rotors. I got a sinking feeling and asked the question I should have asked long ago, "Did we hit anything back there?"

The right gunner said he thought we had, so we decided to land, shut down, and check it out. Sure enough, two of the tip caps were mangled badly. It was the first time something like this had happened to me, and, right or wrong, I thought it best to call home base and have them change the tip caps on site.

They couldn't get help to us until the next morning, so I sent my copilot and one of the crewmen home with another helo, while the first crewman and I stayed with the damaged bird. It was a beautiful desert night. We had a good campfire going under a blanket of stars, with coyotes howling in the distance. Unfortunately, I was having a hard time enjoying the moment.

Back home the next morning, the CO chewed my butt and suspended my TERF qual. I also had to apologize to the duty section for putting them through a sleepless night, and then I had to brief the ready room on the many mistakes I'd made throughout the evolution. I had a long night to think about my errors. I've also been the butt of more weed-whacking jokes, and variations thereof, than I would have thought possible.

Even though this flight was a painful experience, I still consider myself fortunate. I learned a lot that day, but there is one lesson I never will forget. I always have briefed "comfort level" for low-level hops, and I believe my philosophy is standard. We fly to the lowest comfort level. If you're uncomfortable with any aspect of the flight regime, speak up. We'll terminate our training and discuss the source of discomfort. If we can't fix it, we'll knock it off and RTB. I violated my own brief.

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There are large portions of the aircraft the pilots can't clear when flying in confined areas, particularly when operating with NVGs. We must trust our aircrewman implicitly in the TERF environment. I recognized an unsafe situation and let someone else talk me into continuing. I have no one to blame but myself, but it won't happen again. Junior or senior, regardless of positional authority, when my comfort level is exceeded, the training stops. The trees at Peter Cain cost me two tip caps and a bruised ego, but the results could have been much worse.

LCdr. Vincent flies with HS-14.