HMLA-773

From left to right: Maj. Sanjeev Shinde, Sgt. Darren Hitch, Sgt. Christopher Barrett, and Maj. Ethan Andrews.

BRAVO Zulu

Crosshair 61 was Dash 2 in a flight of three during a combat flight from a forward-operating base (FOB) in eastern Afghanistan to Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan.

It was just after sunset when the flight crew prepared to land at their destination after the two-hour flight. About three miles south of Bagram, the UH-1N suddenly developed a high-frequency airframe vibration. They needed to land as soon as possible, if not immediately. The vibration was severe, and the nature of the damage (e.g., mechanical failure or battle damage) was unknown.

Maj. Sanjeev Shinde, aircraft commander, set up to land at a clearing off the nose; the crew prepared to land. Maj. Shinde broadcast a Mayday call over the common air-to-ground frequency. While on final for landing, Maj. Ethan Andrews, copilot, with Sgt. Christopher Barrett and Sgt. Darren Hitch, crew chiefs, saw the landing zone was unsuitable because of deep ruts. Maj. Shinde continued for another 50 yards to a more suitable area and made a no-hover landing. The time from onset of the vibration to landing was less than one minute.

After landing, Maj. Shinde shut down the aircraft. Because of the uncertain tactical situation, Maj. Andrews and the crew quickly exited the aircraft and established a defensive perimeter. Dash 3, an AH-1W, took overhead cover, while the lead UH-1N continued to Bagram to facilitate the recovery effort.

During the landing, Sgts. Barrett and Hitch observed the tail rotor and 90-degree gearbox wobbling severely. With the pilots manning the defensive perimeter, the crew chiefs inspected the tail rotor. They found a large chunk of material missing from the end-cap portion of one blade. This missing material made the tail rotor extremely out-of-balance, which caused the vibration. This information was relayed to the squadron maintenance department. Within minutes, the lead UH-1N returned with a toolbox.

While the pilots continued to man defensive positions, the crew chiefs quickly removed the damaged tail-rotor blade. At Bagram, the squadron maintenance department rapidly organized the personnel, equipment and parts to make the recovery. In less than three hours, at night, in austere conditions, the squadron maintenance department changed the damaged tail rotor and returned the aircraft to Bagram.

This crew weighed the risks and correctly made the tough call: Land for an aircraft emergency, despite being over unsecured territory in a combat zone. Had they delayed their decision to land, this story could have been the background for an SIR, not a BZ. —Ed.