

Too Close

By Lt. William Delmar

I can remember walking away from my last flight in the HTs, thinking my mind was made up on what my dream sheet preferences would be. All helicopter pilots are familiar with the flatbed truck of a landing surface known as IX-514. This less-than-formidable, deck-landing trainer patrolled the calm waters of Santa Rosa Bay and offered aspiring aviators their first taste of a landing surface that wasn't stationary. I knew then I wanted the challenge of landing on small decks.

I left for the beaches of Jacksonville with orders to fly the SH-60B at HSL-40, the fleet-replacement squadron (FRS). I was on my way to test my skills in one of the most difficult landing environments offered to helicopter pilots. After completing the pilot phase of the FRS, I entered the airborne-tactical officer (ATO) phase, where I spent most of my days in a simulator, punching buttons in tactical scenarios. When I called for my next simulator event, I was surprised to be scheduled for my RAST-landing/deck-landing qualification (RLQ/DLQ) flight. RLQ/DLQ periods were hard to come by in the FRS because they depend on the underway schedules of the LAMPS-capable ships in the basin. A backlog of students wait for their boat.

The squadron scheduler assigned two aircraft for the event. The plan was to launch in the afternoon, complete the initial day requirements for all the students, and then roll into the night requirements. The crew consisted of a senior HAC instructor and a senior aircrewman assigned to the three students. By the time I climbed into the seat, there was a problem with the deck-landing system, and we were delayed in the pattern. I logged my required five day approaches and landings, then flew back to the beach to refuel. As evening fell, we decided to roll in and complete my night requirements. Most of the other

students already had flown back to the beach because they had missed their opportunity for day requirements and were ineligible for the night requirements.

The moon had not risen, so the night was dark. I was not prepared for the change of atmosphere in the transition from day into night. Flying a night approach is scan-intensive and is more of a basic instrument maneuver than a night familiarization VFR challenge. After a few approaches, I concentrated harder on the gauges to maintain parameters. In reality, my scan was breaking down as I fixated on the gauges.

As I rolled final and tried to line up the aircraft at the initial point of 400 feet, 80 knots, and 1.2 miles, I saw a bright green light and then felt the aircraft shudder. I thought it could have been a wind burble, but that would not explain the green light. As I looked over my right shoulder, I saw a bright white light. That green light had been the starboard-position light, and



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the white light was the tail-position light of the other helicopter in the pattern. The wind burble was—you guessed it—rotor wash.

I looked at the instructor; he was white as a ghost. We completed the hop in near silence, contemplating our own mortality. Words could not describe what had happened. The following day, I debriefed with my instructor about the near-miss. As I concentrated on my approach and fixated on the gauges, he graded the last approach and jotted down pointers for critique on his kneeboard. Our senior aircrewman in the back never saw the contact.

Our crew had lost situational awareness. When we assembled with the crew in the other helicopter, they told a similar story. In both cases, inexperienced students were on the controls, instructor pilots were in the grade sheets, and no contact reports were made by either senior aircrewman. The final tally showed six breakdowns of scan and flight responsibilities, with six lives at stake.

I'm currently on my first deployment and operate regularly around ships. I look back at that night and know neither skill nor experience saved us from a midair collision—we simply were fortunate. Good aviation skills and an alert aircrew never would have put us in that situation. There was a complete breakdown in situational awareness and flight responsibilities by both aircrews. I became complacent and thought my instructor pilot was the only person who could keep the aircraft and the crew out of harm's way.

The duration of the flight also was a factor in my scan breakdown. I was fatigued after flying the day-into-night bags. Part of me was itching to finish this flight so I could go home and study before checking out to a fleet squadron. I almost checked out early.

Flying is a dangerous profession, and I constantly am reminded that a complacent attitude and loss of situational awareness have larger consequences than just getting off parameters. 🦅

Lt. Delmar flies with HSL-44 Det 8.

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