

by Lt. Melissa Gerace

How long does it take to get deep into the Black Hole—5, 10, 15 seconds? That depends on how slowly you move from altitude to ground zero.

It was a dark night with no moon and enough haze to call it actual IMC. After an uneventful early morning flight, we headed home for a 0130 land time and some well-deserved sleep. Each pilot had flown during the flight and was feeling fine.

As the ship set flight quarters, we made a few practice approaches for currency and training. We started our descent at 200 feet, approximately a half mile behind the ship.

As my H2P shot the approach and called for the descent, I called, “Roger, descending, you’re left of line-up. Ship’s moving at ten knots. Tower, turn up the line-up and drop lights. Down on the SGSI.” Somewhere in the background, I vaguely remember my sensor operator’s 100-foot call. We were too busy talking or fixating on external elements.

Neither of us heard our associated variable-index, low-altitude warning on our radalts, and no one remembers the sensor operator’s 50-foot call. As I looked inside, I saw the altimeter going through 20 feet.

“Power, power!” I called, as I pulled enough collective to get us climbing with low-rotor warnings and a ship somewhere in front.

What had just happened? Was everyone OK? After leveling off at 1,000 feet and clear of the ship, we realized we almost hit that big, Black Hole. How? We had been so careful. Yet, uncooperative landing lights, fixation, and loss of situational awareness nearly did us in.

I can’t tell you how fast it occurred because it only took seconds to put us into that situation. We estimate we were at 40 knots and 10 feet before we put power on the aircraft. But I can tell you it took minutes to calm down enough to land and hours before we regained our composure.

Somehow, another aircrew had cheated the Black Hole. We had broken the event chain and got our helicopter back to level flight, thanks to our training. Keep on your toes and keep your scans moving because it’s wait- ing for you. Don’t let your crew be the next to

enter the Black Hole. 

Lt. Gerace flies with HSL-46’s Det 5.

What Black Holes?



Photo-composite by Allan Amen

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