

Helo-Dunker Refresher— for Real!

We had gone from single-engine to dual-engine loss and full autorotation within two minutes.

by Lt. Ryan Christopher

What can you gain by having your crew chief or second crewman up and about in the aircraft troubleshooting an emergency at low altitude? Not enough! The day I ended up reenacting my helo-dunker refresher for real changed how I thought about crew responsibilities during an emergency.

I was not even an H2P, just a green PQM on my first sea deployment. We hot-seated and added an aux tank because the flight deck was going to secure for dinner, as is the custom on MSC ships. This type of flight had become routine with our detachment because our ship's civilian flight-deck crew also worked in the galley.

We briefed the flight, planning to go out for three hours of instrument work. I made an uneventful left-seat takeoff to the starboard side and began a gradual turn at 300 feet until the ops-normal report. It wasn't long into the turn when I got the aft and forward reports that everything was normal. I leveled my turn and headed for the 3-mile arc to begin a shipboard-TACAN approach.

We placed the aux tank in transfer mode but couldn't see indications of positive transfer from the aux tank. The second crewman reported a kink in the hose and tried to straighten it. Once he said he'd fixed it, we got good indications of transfer of aux-tank fuel.

As I made a right turn onto the arc at 2.5 miles, the crew chief asked me where the ship was. I responded, "Three miles off our three o'clock," and asked if there was a problem.

The crew chief said the No. 2 fuel filter had popped and would not reset. The HAC called for me to turn the aircraft back toward the ship, and I began fuel-contamination procedures according to NATOPS. The HAC started the first five steps of single-engine procedures and pulled out his pocket checklist.

While reviewing the procedures, the crew chief reported both filters had popped and would not reset. I called tower and asked for a green deck. Tower responded that it would take a few minutes to reman flight quarters. Shortly after that, we lost our No. 2 engine. We were heavy with the extra gas but somehow maintained level flight at 300 feet. I did my best to maintain best single-engine airspeed of 70 knots.

I concentrated on getting back to the ship while the HAC finished the single-engine procedures. He dumped fuel from the no.1 side and started the APU to try a restart. The HAC asked for dual concurrence on the No. 2 ECL and after asking me twice, I concurred. Before he could move the ECL to crank, I heard it get very quiet and noticed the gauges on the No. 1 side falling off. The

HAC took control and entered a full no-power autorotation.

I called out, "Mayday, mayday, mayday!" and flipped the No. 2 fuel-jettison valve. I called out, "Nr decreasing," and switched to APU power. We felt the familiar kick in the controls as the AFCS went off and back on.

We had gone from single-engine to dual-engine loss and a full autorotation within two minutes. Just before we hit, I somehow managed to remove my door. The next thing I knew, I was looking at my feet and struggling to get free of the sinking helicopter. After finding my HEEDS and relaxing, I managed to go through the egress steps just like we brief. Well, I forgot my ICS cord, but it came off in my fight to get out.

Once I surfaced, it became clear what I had neglected during the emergencies and my fixation with flying. I forgot about the aircrew in back and what they were doing. I saw the HAC after the waves lifted me, but I did not see the other half of our crew. I called out their names as I swam to the HAC. We spotted the second crewman and swam to him. We hooked up our lobes and began calling for the crew chief, but our calls went unanswered.

The second crewman later told us that the crew chief was still up in the back when we crashed. The second crewman managed to get seated before we hit but didn't get his seat belt fastened. The second crewman got out; the crew chief didn't.

I've heard that you learn the most from your mistakes and that hindsight is 20/20. I agree with both and encourage you to remember that the crew in back is relying on you. You're responsible for them. If you have a day like we had, everyone in your crew can escape, although they may be battered and bruised. This mishap resulted in an urgent warning that says crewmen must get seated and strapped in during emergencies. Stress this rule at every brief. 🦅

Lt. Christopher flies with HC-5.