

By Mark L. Watson

Those words are as clear in my mind today as they were on April 10, 1981. We were a flight of two SH-3Gs, flying from NAS North Island to NAS Fallon for predeployment training. That morning, we attended a normal brief, and our pilot said we would stop at NAS China Lake for fuel and chow. We loaded the aircraft with cruise boxes, a ladder, and luggage, then departed for China Lake.

This portion of the flight was normal, with the exception of an intermittent low howl that came from the gearbox area of the No. 2 engine. The rest of the crew seemed to dismiss this noise; in fact, they even had a name for it, “the H-3 howl.”

I was a new rescue swimmer, with less than 20 hours of flight time, and I was excited about going to Fallon for combat-search-and-rescue-training flights. We never did get to those flights.

Before departing China Lake, the pilot, first crewman, and I decided, because we were over land, and it was too hot, there was no reason to wear flotation devices. Never mind our flotation device is connected to the rest of our survival equipment. The copilot and our second crewman (another qualified first crewman, who decided to fly in our bird) wisely continued to wear their SV2s.

The takeoff and departure were normal, as we fell into a right trail with the lead

Fire! Fire!
Mayday! Mayday!
We're Going Down!



went forward toward the fire and reached behind a curtain of flames to retrieve our only hand-held fire extinguisher. As the first crewman ran aft, he fell on the deck, dropping the fire extinguisher in front of the second crewman and myself. I picked up the 30-second CO₂ fire extinguisher but realized I had absolutely no idea how to use it. Fortunately, our second crewman didn't hesitate to remove it from my dumbfounded hands, and he attacked the fire. By this time, a wall of flames covered the entire width of the cabin, quickly rolled aft, and cut us completely off from the pilots. The 30-second extinguisher lasted maybe 10 seconds, but it was enough to temporarily slow the advancing wall of flames.

As all of this was going on in the back, our pilots

aircraft. Then, 10 minutes into the flight, the second crewman and I heard a muffled "bang." The first crewman said it might have been one of our main-gearbox doors opening in flight. Our pilot asked lead to come over and check us. After our wingman gave us a clean bill of health, and we couldn't determine the source of the bang, we continued on our way.



The flight was going great. We were cruising next to Highway 395 at about 700 feet AGL, and I just had finished filming Mount Whitney with my hi-tech, 8 mm camera. I was walking forward when there was an unbelievably loud "H-3 howl" that ended in an even louder "boom." We immediately had a cabin fire that spanned from the overhead to the deck of the cabin just aft of the HAC and was half the width of the cabin. I quickly went to the troop seat nearest the aft-cabin door and strapped in.

The HAC entered an auto-rotation and made the call, "Fire! Fire! Mayday! Mayday! We're going down!"

I watched with admiration as the first crewman

more than had their hands full (as we later discovered). When the No. 2 engine's high-speed shaft departed the aircraft—because of a gearbox malfunction—the shaft or something else slammed through the overhead. The fuel lines were severed at the cross-feed valve, which caused the left engine to flame out because of fuel starvation.

In the back, we followed the NATOPS procedures for cabin fire. We closed the cabin door, which caused thick, black smoke to instantly fill the cabin and cockpit. Our HAC was forced to stick his head out the window to see during the autorotation. The HAC told us over the ICS to open the cabin door, which cleared out the smoke enough to give me a great, though unwelcome, view of the quickly approaching desert floor.

While many thoughts went through my mind during this surreal ordeal, I tried to focus on the wall of fire melting my seat a few inches from where I was strapped in. I placed my hand on the seatbelt release and was ready to trigger it so I could join the first crewman who was spread out on the deck aft. Only the two aft-most seats on each side were not on fire. I saw the horizon shift as the HAC initiated the autorotation flair. I could feel our rate of descent stop and then pick up again. What I didn't know was the HAC had initiated the recovery early, trying to balloon the aircraft over a ravine.

As the descent again started, and I saw the ground coming up fast, I didn't feel our rate of descent decrease as before. We hit the ground hard and rolled right; I was compressed into my seat, then thrown forward into the fire. Had I inadvertently released my seatbelt because I held the release with my hand? I felt something, maybe a cruise box or ladder, hit me. I was on fire. I was a ray of light aft of the cargo door, and the top of the door was less than two feet from dirt.

We hit the ground hard and rolled right; I was compressed into my seat, then thrown forward into the fire.

The emergency egress procedures we had briefed automatically came to mind as I crawled through the exit.

1. **Make sure the blades are stopped.** Yep, what's left of the blade is stopped—stuck in dirt.

2. **Get clear of the aircraft.** I set a record in the 100-yard dash.

3. **If I am on fire, lie down and roll.** Although I could feel the heat, I no longer was on fire; back to the 100-yard dash. The heat I felt was because of the molten metal and melted plastic that covered my flight suit.

As I looked back, I saw the other two crewmen come out of the fire the same way I had escaped. The pilots quickly appeared forward of the aircraft. We came together, checking each other for injuries, and, to our amazement, we were all in good shape. My HAC pointed to my left hand. As I looked down at the second-degree burns, I remembered I had removed my flight gloves during the flight, exposing my bare

skin. Why? Well, they were too uncomfortable to wear. Unfortunately, I was about to find out the treatment for such a burn is much more uncomfortable than following NATOPS. I also received two burns from molten metal that had gone through my flight-deck jersey and into my chest. I had my flight suit zipped down for comfort—I would say I tried to look like a “Top Gun” pilot, but that movie hadn't yet been made.

As we stood, watching the magnesium in the main gearbox burn, along with the rest of the aircraft, our wingman came in low to see if we were OK. But he had to climb when pencil flares started shooting into the air from the burning wreckage—a reminder some of us didn't have something else: our SV2s.

I learned many lessons the hard way that day. Make sure you know how to operate your emergency equipment, and, most of all, wear your flight gear at all times. You may not have the time to retrieve it if you ever hear these words: “Fire! Fire! Mayday! Mayday! We're going down!”

I had the chance to use my flight gear again six years later, and I did wear all the proper gear, but that's another story.

The pilot and first and second crewmen received air medals for their skill and courage that day, as well as the heartfelt thanks from my family and me. 🏆

Mark Watson is a retired ADCS and currently is an A & P mechanic.

Note to editor from the author: I read the final mishap investigation of this incident years later, and, to the best of my knowledge, it was caused by a main-gearbox-gear-plating process that broke down, causing an input failure. The flight suit I wore was taken from me, and I was told it was sent to the Safety Center. Just the heat from metal and plastic transferred, but the flight-suit material did not burn through. Our wingman and his crew said we had flames pouring out of the main-rotor head and transmission area—it looked like someone had put a fan over the top of a bucket of burning fuel. We could hear the HAC in the other aircraft repeating the same thing over and over on the radios “Get it on the deck now, Kick; it's bad—it's bad!” (Lt. Kickla was our HAC). At the time of the mishap, I was a new E-5, and hadn't been out of aviation-rescue-swimmer school very long.

The mishap board determined that if we had had about 200 more feet of altitude, if the first crewman had not gotten the fire extinguisher, and if the second crewman had not used it effectively, all of us in the back most likely would have perished because of the rapidly moving fire. We quickly were running out of places to go.