

## Which Way Is Up?

by Lt. Scott Penland

The night began like many other routine nights in the Gulf but ended with a lesson in ORM. Current tasking had our LAMPS SH-60B routinely flying three bags a night. Well into our second week of this tasking, my circadian rhythm had finally adjusted, and I was feeling comfortable flying two bags a night.

After our brief in combat, the OinC said he wanted me to brief and run the flight as I saw fit. I finished the crew brief and asked for questions. The OinC added a few pearls of wisdom, and then told us we'd be descending to 200 feet in order to VID and rig all surface contacts. After completing our standard ORM brief, the OinC briefed the approach and (to avoid confusion in the aircraft) crew responsibilities. The maneuver seemed like most other nighttime descents, except that we were rigging contacts in the Gulf. The flying pilot would be responsible for maintaining visual separation from the contact, operating the searchlight, and crosschecking the flight instruments.

The other pilot would be responsible

for maintaining an instrument scan and copying information from the crewman. The crewman was to rig all contacts and pass the information to the nonflying pilot. After the brief and our ORM discussion, we felt comfortable enough to attempt this new maneuver.

Thirty minutes into the flight, we came across our first contact. It was a typical, group III tanker, well-lit and moving at about 15 knots. The OinC was on the controls, flying right seat, when



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he began his descent. He told the crewman he was bringing the contact down the right side of the aircraft. At 200 feet, we leveled off and engaged the RADALT hold. The crewman rigged the contact while I passed the contact's information to our ASTAC. After completing our first 200-foot VID, the crew felt comfortable with the entire approach.

On our way to a new contact, visibility decreased to just more than a mile, and the hazy

horizon had all but disappeared. The OinC passed control of the aircraft over to me and said I could take the next approach. As the new contact came into sight, we completed the procedures for descending IMC at night. Flying from the left seat, I decided to take the ship down the left side and began my descent to 200 feet. I soon developed a mild case of vertigo. As I leveled off at 200 feet, I informed the crew. The OinC asked if I was OK, said that he was

backing me up on the instruments, and told me he would take the controls if necessary.

I said, "I'm OK." The contact was just on my left at 11 o'clock. I switched from my instrument scan to a visual one in order to maintain separation.

The crewman was having trouble rigging the contact from his point of view, so the OinC told me to bring the nose of the helicopter to the right to give the crewman a better aspect. The nose came to the right, and my sight picture changed dramatically as the bright lights flooded my vision. The contact was now at the nine o'clock position, drifting aft and then disappearing from my field of view. I was left staring into a void. Without visual references, my mild case of vertigo turned into a major case of the leans. I reverted back to an instrument scan but was having a hard time controlling the aircraft.

As we descended to 150 feet, the OinC realized my predicament and came on the controls. However, flying cross-cockpit, he couldn't see the merchant. The crewman

reported that the bow of the contact was still at our nine o'clock but was about to pass underneath us. Passing through 120 feet, the OinC stated that he had vertigo, too; he pulled in power and climbed to 500 feet. He then confessed that flying cross-cockpit had induced vertigo, but he was able to maneuver us away from danger.

We continued flying at 500 feet, straight and level, until the entire crew was able to get rid of their vertigo. After our pulses dropped back into the normal range, we decided against rigging any more contacts and remained at 500 feet for the rest of the flight.

After the flight, I realized we had used ORM in the cockpit. As problems developed during the flight, this process proved invaluable. After our scare, we reassessed the hazards and concluded the mission requirements did not outweigh the risks involved on that particular night. ORM isn't a process you complete in the brief and then forget. It can be especially important during the flight, too. 

Lt. Penland flies with HSL-45, Det. 6.

## What are the chances?

In 1,000 hours of flying fighter/attack:

- Your chance of crashing is – 1 in 25
- Your chance of ejecting is – 1 in 40
- Your chance of dying is – 1 in 71
- If you eject, your chance of dying is – 1 in 7

In 1,000 hours of flying helicopters:

- Your chance of crashing is – 1 in 59
- Your chance of dying is – 1 in 177

In contrast:

- Your chance of winning the Virginia Lottery is – 1 in 14,000,000 (13,983,816 - to be exact)
- In a year: your chance of dying due to homicide is – 1 in 26,000
- Illness is – 1 in 11,000
- Suicide is – 1 in 8,000
- Off-duty mishap is – 1 in 4,000

Manage  
your  
risk