

Not the Preferred Option, but...

By Capt. Erik Bartelt, USMC, with Maj. Peter Calogero, USMC

This account is not unique in its operating environment: personnel from every active-duty HMLA squadron and the fleet replacement squadron (FRS) engaged enemy forces during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

On April 4, 2003, we were Dash 2 of a three-ship of AH-1W Super Cobras on a close-air-support mission along highway 6, about 15 miles southeast of Baghdad. We just had checked in with a forward-air controller for one of the leading elements of 1st Marine Division, who were with a convoy fighting in a small city along the highway. There was a great deal of smoke in the area from burning vehicles and oil trenches the Iraqis had lit before our ground elements moved through.

Our typical operating altitudes were below 200 feet and above 100 knots. As is standard in the Cobra, I did most of the flying from the backseat, while the frontseater navigated, worked the radios, and used the sensor pack-

age in the nose to look for targets. We had been on station for two to three minutes and were getting the lay of the land from another section of Cobras that had been on scene for some time.

Our division lead suddenly called out "Taking fire," and broke away from the city. After looking for the source of fire for a couple of seconds but not seeing a target to engage, I broke hard left to follow lead. I also came under fire (follow-on flights found concealed-fighting positions underneath our holding pattern).

I could hear multiple hits in close succession, and Plexiglas canopy shards hit me in the face. I usually wear a double visor, and I'm glad I did. We heard an immediate master-caution tone and continued the break turn to clear the area. Numerous minor electrical-caution lights were on, including the light for the utility-hydraulic system that powers the oil cooler for the two main gearboxes.

At this time, both wingmen had joined on lead, who also had taken about 10 hits and had made the call for the flight to RTB. It was about 60 miles, about 30 minutes flying time, to our nearest FARP (forward arming and refueling point). By now, I had switched the oil cooler to its secondary position to run off one of the two main-hydraulic systems, which also power the flight controls.

I came inside and gave all the gauges a more detailed look for any other problems. The gunner kept a look-out for other threats and for the numerous high-tension power lines in the area. He made at least one hard pull on the cyclic to avoid wires, while I concentrated more

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airborne, providing security, and coordinated for a section of our squadron Hueys, which also were in the area. One of the senior crew chiefs inspected both aircraft and determined neither was a quick fix to fly out of the area. The Hueys and Dash 3 then departed the area to coordinate a maintenance recovery.

Several antitank Humvees from 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines, almost immediately surrounded our helos. They were relieved by elements of 4th Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, which stayed around the aircraft until our squadron maintenance team and MWSS-271 were able to truck them out two days later. Inspection revealed Class B damage from 7.62 mm rounds to the oil cooler, both rotor blades, sighting unit, No. 2 engine, forward fuel cell, and structural supports in the tail boom, along with other superficial hits.

Several things helped turn an air emergency into a ground emergency. Our squadron routinely had flown training missions involving long ranges and FARP operations (including brownout landings), which we encountered during OIF. Pilots had been paired in combat crews for two months before hostilities started, so we were familiar with how each other dealt with cockpit responsibilities and stress. Most importantly, we had discussed, as a squadron and as individual crews, modifications to EPs, based on combat conditions. Most of the modifications involved flying with a “land as soon as possible” EP for what normally would be associated with “land as soon as practical” distances, or continuing the mission with “land as soon as practical” EPs.

A month before, the gunner and I had agreed the impending loss of any gearbox was not one of the EPs we could stretch for an extended period to reach a friendly airfield. That agreement made landing a no-brainer once the C-box caution light came on.

Don't be afraid to alter your perceptions of which options are good, ones that aren't great but probably workable, or ones that still are unacceptable. While we did create a logistical and security headache by landing, the aircraft probably would not have made it back to our FARP. Also, don't make fun of your brethren in the ground-combat arms. 🦅

Capt. Bartelt (pilot) and Maj. Calogero (gunner) fly with HMLA-267.

on the gauges and less on flying the aircraft. The entire area was by no means secure, and we fully intended to bring all three aircraft back along the highway (over friendlies) to our FARP.

About two minutes after being hit, we received a temperature-pressure caution light for the combining gearbox (which joins both engines to the main transmission that then spins the rotors). Oil pressure was stable, so we weren't losing oil, but the temperature already was 15 degrees above NATOPS red line and climbing. All Cobra pilots have had the ready-room discussion about overtemping the C-box if necessary, but neither of us thought we had another half-hour of flight time left on this gearbox. We elected to put down the aircraft and told our division leader of our intentions.

After another minute or so of flight—about five miles from where we had been hit—we saw a turnout off of the highway that met three criteria for landing: The site was clear of the numerous towns along the road, it looked more than big enough with a relatively hard surface, and a large number of friendly armored vehicles were moving past. As soon as we landed, I performed an emergency shutdown, while the gunner ran to the column along the road and coordinated security.

Lead also landed and shut down to inspect for damage, as we saw several hits near his tail-rotor drive-shaft. His aircraft looked flyable back to the FARP, but some of the electrical system had been shot out, and he was unable to restart either engine. Dash 3 remained