

# Are You Sure About That?

by Lt. Michael B. Carson

It was the last WestPac of the millennium, and I was the new guy in town. The squadron was flying over 500 hours per month during our deployment to the Arabian Gulf. Everyone was working, flying and playing hard. We were getting a new CAG helo guy to help us out by pulling some of the load.

CAG helicopter representatives routinely are tasked with augmenting the squadrons in the air wing. Ours was new to the job but was an experienced pilot. He had over 1,000 hours in Sikorsky aircraft, a tour as an FRS instructor, and was among the first helicopter pilots to go through the Weapons and Tactics Instructor course at the Naval Strike and Air Warfare Center in Fallon, Nev.

It was a beautiful, clear day in the Gulf. I recently had survived my H2P board (helicopter second pilot for you non-rotor heads out there). I felt good about myself and looked forward to an exciting hop—that's defined as anything other than plane guard for us. I was to fly a cool helicopter aerial-gunnery exercise. We typically take off with a couple thousand 7.62 mm tracer rounds, two M-240 machine guns capable of firing 900 rounds per minute, six replacement barrels, and several naval aircrewmen who need practice at killing things. All we would be killing today was a Mk-58 marine locator marker, but we were amped up anyway.

We were 15 miles from the CV and ready to rock and roll. The crew chief tossed the target smoke out the door and reported it lit. This would be fun!

I was in the right seat, usually the aircraft commander's position for this event, and had the flight controls for most of our gun runs. The first two runs were smooth as glass. We made our strafing runs into the wind at 120 knots, ball centered, and left-hand turns. The machine gun was mounted in the cabin door on the right side of the aircraft. Coming off the third run, I snapped the aircraft to the left on crosswind. Bam! Bam! Bam! Mini-explosions, like so many cluster bombs, were coming from the left side of the aircraft.

My first thought was that we had a runaway gun, left side. I leveled the wings, scanned the engine instruments, and realized there was no gun on the left side.

Then it hit me: compressor stall. Execute critical memory items. Engine indications normal. What to do? Head for home. Turning for the ship, my mind racing. Inform crew. Done.

"I have the controls. Pocket checklist," the pilot said. A sense of relief swept over me. I was safe now, or so I thought.

I asked myself, "What are my primary responsibilities as the copilot?" I had to back up the pilot at the controls. I was deep into the



checklist. Single-engine procedures call for dumping fuel, if required. Boy, did I want to dump fuel. After all, we just had lifted off with 4,500 pounds of gas 15 minutes ago, and it was summer in the Arabian Gulf. Helicopter aerodynamics are all about power required versus power available. It doesn't take a genius to figure out engines will give you only a finite amount of power, and, the heavier you are, the more power will be required to lift you. If we lost the left engine, we would have to swim for it because we wouldn't have enough power to fly with one engine. I wasn't interested in swimming.

I suggested we dump fuel, but I was rebuked. The PAC had other things on his mind. He was talking to the boss, requested landing as soon as

possible and flying the aircraft back to the boat. I said, "Are you sure about that?" I strongly felt dumping fuel was the right thing to do to minimize our power required for landing. Rebuked a second time, I let it slide and moved on to the before-landing checklist. We were going home in our present configuration.

We landed with no further incidents. Our story could have ended much differently. I had let the classic barriers to communication—age, rank and experience—cloud my judgment. As discussed in the debrief, dumping gas would have been the right decision to make. When you're in a critical situation, and you know you're right, stick to your guns, and do the right thing. 🇺🇸

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