

Crew Resource Management

Situational Awareness

Assertiveness

Decision Making

Communication

Leadership

Adaptability/Flexibility

Mission Analysis



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Fish Food

By Ltjg. Jason M. Gelfand, USCG

Several years ago, I was part of a crew-resource-management circus that nearly killed three pilots, two crew chiefs, and destroyed one helicopter.

During work-ups for my first deployment, I was scheduled as pilot-under-instruction for low-light level (less than .0022 lux), ship-landing practice off the Southern California coast. I often flew with ANVIS-6 night-vision goggles and felt comfortable using them. I had proceeded through the training syllabus with no problems.

Our UH-1N, along with an AH-1W from our detachment, planned to depart mother, an LHA, and fly to one of the two smaller decks in the amphibious-ready group. Our Huey would have two pilots, two crew chiefs, and an extra Cobra copilot. We would drop off the extra copilot on the small deck, where he would wait to hot seat with the first Cobra copilot. The brief and preflight were uneventful, but it was scary dark on the flight deck. Even with the NVGs, you barely could see the horizon.

Our night-ship-takeoff profile was similar to an instrument takeoff: It was more altitude than airspeed, compared to a standard day-takeoff from a runway. Pilots and crew chiefs were goggled from takeoff to landing. The pilot at the controls scanned outside to keep us clear of the ship and other aircraft on the flight deck and in the pattern.

The pilot not at the controls was concerned with the gauges and ensuring maximum power. Using the ICS, he also announced three indications of climb on the radar altimeter, vertical-speed indicator, and barometric altimeter.

The Huey NATOPS warns not to change radio switches and lighting configuration below 200 feet at night over water. We slid left, cleared the deck edge, and climbed to the pattern altitude of 300 feet for our departure from mother. While climbing, my instructor quickly directed me to switch to the small-deck radio frequency to get ahead of the game. I could picture the NATOPS text in my mind, as I mentally shrugged, ignored the gauges, and leaned over to tune the radio. Switching the radio took a while because the frequency for the small deck was not preset. The

next thing I remember hearing was our crew chief yelling, "Pull up! Pull up!"

As the IP yanked back on the cyclic, I felt the pulling-Gs feeling for the first time since T-34 training. I looked at the radar altimeter and read 25 feet—and that was after the climb started. If our crew chief hadn't yelled at us, we would have become fish food.

This near-mishap was caused by a breakdown of basic crew-resource management, and lessons easily can be digested, using the tenets of CRM.

Leadership: My IP failed to delegate tasks according to NATOPS. I only should have been tasked to back up the pilot at controls until we were established at pattern altitude.

Assertiveness: I failed to refuse an unreasonable request because of a copilot mentality. I should have said, "I'll get the radio as soon as we're over 200 feet," and continued to back up the IP on the gauges. Our crew chief, by contrast, was an experienced sergeant who had no hesitation about challenging two captains with 1,500 hours of combined experience when safety became an issue.

Situational Awareness: The IP had a breakdown in his basic-instrument scan, and I wasn't even looking.

Communication: The crew chief communicated the correct information with the right tone and volume. He spoke as if we were about to kill him, which was the case. We owed him our lives.

Mission Analysis: The Cobra passenger in the main-cabin center seat watched the entire scenario, including the radar altimeters winding down. As he was about to die, he couldn't say anything because he was fumbling with the Huey ICS press-to-talk switch—he wasn't familiar with the switches. Although not technically a crew member, he should have been more serious about riding in the aircraft at night over water.

When I returned to the training command as a CRM and flight instructor, I told this story at the end of every CRM class to illustrate the importance of the basics, especially as a new copilot. I do not recall any students ever falling asleep during this story. It's no surprise that self-induced, near-death experiences get the most attention in the classroom or ready room. When was the last time you told a similar story more seriously? 🛩️

Ltjg. Gelfand is former Marine who flew UH-1Ns with HMLA-367, and later instructed at HT-8. He now flies with USCG Air Station Port Angeles.



Photo by Clover B. Christensen