



# Climb or Dive?

by Ltjg. Rich King

**H**aving recently received my PQM (Pilot Qualified in Model) letter in the SH-60B, I was anxious to embark on my first underway: a five-week fleet exercise in the Puerto Rico Op Area. Still adjusting to flying as a member of a crew instead of a student, I was about to learn important lessons on crew coordination and flying what was briefed.

As soon as we lifted in the early evening, things were already busy with the ASW exercise. Two ships were reporting hot contact, and another helicopter was inbound to datum. We were closer and were instructed to immediately get on top of contact and put an SUS on target. After two urgent attacks, we were vectored by our ASTAC

to play high boy at 800 feet and let some other assets get in on the fun. The other SH-60B, an unannounced SH-60F, and a number of ships were trying to get in the act. We were instructed to head south to clear the area and allow a sister ship to conduct an over-the-side torpedo shot.

The hazy evening that we had launched into gradually turned into the classic black night at sea with no moon and an obscured horizon. I was in the left seat trying to recover from the frantic pace of prosecuting a sub. Our det OinC was the HAC, sitting in the right seat as we headed 180 to clear the area. After settling in at altitude and reporting, “Cherubs eight, clear to the south,” we noticed two lights at the same altitude heading in our general

direction. We guessed they were two miles away, but they could have been five miles away in the perception-robbing blackness. We decided to turn on our searchlight to allow the oncoming aircraft a better view of our position. We began turning right to increase the lateral separation. We remarked that the aircrew in the other aircraft would certainly see both our lights and our unmistakable turn, and they would turn in the opposite direction. Instead, the phantom aircraft appeared to start a slight left turn and ended up in a modified trail position behind our

Immediately after this incident, we (not so professionally) called our ASTAC to find out who was in the other aircraft and what they were doing in the area. Our controller reported that they didn't hold the contact on radar, the contact wasn't talking to them, and they didn't know who was controlling it. The other aircraft had been vectored in from another controlling unit to assist with the ASW prosecution but had failed to check in or let any other aircraft operating in the area know they were inbound. The controlling agencies also failed to talk to each other. Positive

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aircraft, at the same altitude, allowing only the SO and myself to keep visual sight of the aircraft.

With the contact still closing, and its lights glowing more brightly, it was time to start thinking about more aggressive evasive action. Not able to see the incoming aircraft, the OinC called for a recommendation: "Climb or dive?"

"Dive, dive, dive!" the SO and I called in unison, as we started to hear the noise from the engines of the other aircraft. The HAC immediately lowered the collective and began an emergency descent. As we sped through 600 feet, the unmistakable sound of turboprops began to drown out our own aircraft's engine and rotor noise. We stopped our descent at 400 feet, just in time to see the underbelly of the other aircraft as it flew over and past us. Our aircrewman had the presence of mind to direct our onboard FLIR in the direction of the outbound aircraft in time to verify that a P-3 barely had missed us. It had passed overhead with approximately 200 feet vertical separation, within one wingspan of lateral separation, and proceeded onward as if the aircrew never saw us.

control of the aircraft was never transferred to the agency that was working and had control of its assigned area.

Good crew coordination and a textbook NATOPS brief kept our two aircraft from trading paint. The crew had thoroughly briefed lookout responsibilities. In the case of an immediate airborne threat, any crew member can call for an immediate climb, descent, break-right or break-left, as necessary, to clear the threat. The flying pilot executes the maneuver without question, and everyone discusses the situation afterwards.

See-and-avoid as taught in flight school is just as important out in the middle of the ocean as it is at a busy airport. The P-3 pilot maneuvered as if he hadn't seen us, and we don't believe he ever did. We initially saw the P-3's search lights pointing into the waters below, and, had they not been on, we might not have seen it at all. We still haven't figured out why they didn't respond to our searchlight or our large, deliberate turn away from them. 

Ltjg. King flies with HSL-48's Det. 5. He had graduated from the SH-60B FRS two months before the underway period mentioned in this story.