

FOD on Deck Found

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There I was at Naval Station Norfolk air operations, listening intently while my helicopter aircraft commander (HAC) was giving the NATOPS brief. We discussed our fly-on flight, a straight shot 70 miles to the southeast from Norfolk to our ship.

It had been more than a month since we had been embarked in the ship. We thus discussed all pertinent contingencies for flying to the boat, including what approach we would make to the deck, lost communications, loss of tail-rotor drive, and a multitude of other possibilities. What wasn't discussed was what we would do if a large, solid aluminum plate flew through our helo's rotor arc.

We took off from Norfolk on time and made our way southeast, immediately picking up the ship's TACAN: Amazingly, they were right where they were supposed to be. The weather was beautiful and our road was clear, so we flew straight to the ship.

We made it overhead with little difficulty and got a green deck for our approach to the Ticonderoga-class cruiser's deck. We completed the approach with little trouble and positioned the aircraft over the trap in a five-foot hover. My eyes were scanning the line-up lines so I could position us directly over the trap, but in my periphery I saw something that should not have been there. A large, haze-gray, rectangular plate seemed to rise from the hangar door, swoop haphazardly down under the rotor arc, and crash underneath the helicopter's nose. I immediately asked my copilot, "What was that?" To which he responded, "Just land!"

After I landed the aircraft in the trap, the flight-deck director sent a flight-deck crewman to retrieve the FOD from under our helo's nose. We then saw just how large a piece of FOD we had so narrowly avoided. Once we completed shutdown, our crew entered the hangar to get a closeup of the plate: It was a two-feet-by-eight-inch piece of solid aluminum and weighed about 10 lbs. Our post-

flight inspection found no damage to our aircraft, so we determined the FOD had passed just under the rotor arc without hitting the aircraft.

The subsequent investigation revealed that, while in port, ship's company had completed some hangar-door maintenance but didn't properly secure this particular piece of aluminum back to the top of the hangar-door track, an oversight which almost resulted in a major [class A] mishap. Had the aluminum plate made contact with the rotor itself, aircraft damage would most likely have been catastrophic and injured or killed everyone on that flight deck, including our helo crew.

That day's close call taught us always to check with the ship to see if any flight deck maintenance had been done, and, if so, to make sure QA checks were conducted and the flight deck is 100 percent ready. Yes—our helo flight crew had briefed and was prepared for just about any contingency that day, yet we momentarily overlooked the fact that naval aviation has myriad dangers: They aren't always the ones for which your crew is prepared. ☹️

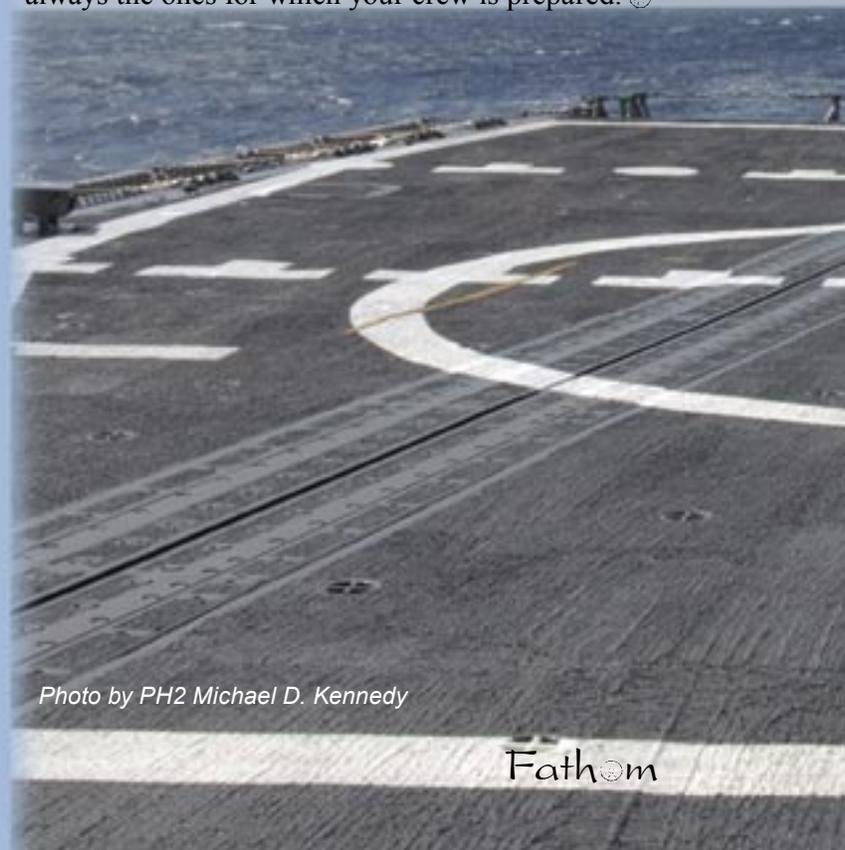


Photo by PH2 Michael D. Kennedy

in Time: Just Land!

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