Stranded at the

By Ltjg. Scott Swagler

H-46s are older than most of the men and women who fly them. The manufacturer's plates are dated mid-1960s. The logbooks, on average, report about 12,500 to 13,000 total hours on each airframe. Four months into a cruise, with a two-plane detachment, recurring problems with such old aircraft become par for the course.

As a second crewman while deployed aboard USS *New Orleans*, I was scheduled to fly on an EOD minex training mission—a good deal for a Gator SAR crew. The flight crew knew one another well and had spent many hours in starboard D together. The mission brief was short; the HAC started it with, "Standard NATOPS brief…," and hit the high points. We then met with the EOD team, talked about emergency scenarios and what they could expect from us, then walked for pre-flight.

The helicopter we were flying that day had its share of chronic problems. The power-management system didn't work and had been disconnected. The check valve on the No. 2 engine's oil reservoir allowed oil to drain back into the engine if it sat for awhile, and the No.1 torque needle always would spin, so the circuit breaker was pulled.

At the end of our preflight inspection, we noted our No. 2 engine oil level was low again, along with a few other minor gripes. We all expected the oil level to come up to normal when the engine was cranked. To avoid overservicing, we made a mental note to check it again once we were up on APU, and we hurried down to get something to eat before our flight.

We manned the helo 30 minutes before launch and waited to be re-spotted before spreading the blades. The pilots moved quickly through the checklist, irritated that we still needed to check the engine oil level. With 15 minutes left before scheduled launch, we were ready to motor the engine. As the helicopters in front and behind us engaged and waited for a green deck, I stood on top of the helicopter and reluctantly told the pilots, over ICS, that our engine needed to be serviced. We called for the troubleshooter (a senior crewman and QAR) standing on the foul line, to put oil into the underserviced engine reservoir.

The pilots did the checklist down to engine start, and the crew chief checked the hoist as I put away the blade tie-down ropes. When the troubleshooter eventually stepped outside the rotor arc and gave us a thumbs up, we had just enough time to make our scheduled launch. The crew chief then took a brief look at the cam-locks on the cowlings to make sure they were fastened. We then turned up.

In the air, the tension in the cockpit seemed to ease, and we congratulated ourselves on the combined effort to launch on time. Twenty minutes later, we jumped the EOD team and established a hover on the other side of the mine shape. They went to work setting their explosives.

When they signaled for pickup, the crew chief talked the pilot down to a 30-foot hover and started hoisting. The last man in the water would wait until the second man was on the hoist before he ignited the time-delayed fuse. From that point, the aircraft would have 10 minutes to recover the last man and reach a safe distance, five miles away. When the smoke started to rise from the fuse, and the last man was swimming toward the hook, the crew chief lost his ICS and motioned me to the door to make the calls.

I moved to the main-cabin door, hooked my gunner's belt to the tie-down ring, and looked for the swimmer, who was about halfway between the helo and the mine shape. I glanced toward the aft rotor to check for salt spray, and, through the gap in the clamshell fairings, I could see the engine oil cap, swinging freely on its keeper chain. I informed the pilot there was a large slick of engine oil down the starboard pylon. The HAC immediately called for watertight integrity and transitioned to forward flight. As the cabin door came up, I tried yelling over the noise of

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Mine Field

two engines and transmissions to tell the EOD HRST master what was happening.

The plan was to drop a raft and head back to the ship. After getting a look at the gauges, the pilots decided to make one low-slow pass to drop the raft and jump the team back into the water.

As we approached 10 feet and 10 knots, the 12-man raft went out, followed by the three men. The pilots marked the radial and DME and headed back to the ship. The weather worsened, and it was nearly an hour before the det could ready the other aircraft for launch to return and to pick up the EOD crew. It was sunset when we found the four men through the haze.

Thorough preflight planning, use of ORM, good crew coordination, and good situational awareness helped us overcome a potentially fatal situation. That was seven years ago, and I'm back in the same squadron as a pilot, deployed with the same detachment on another Gator. The aircraft are even older now, and they still develop those chronic problems.

Ltjg. Swagler flies with HC-11.

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Photograph by Sgt. Brook R. Kelsey, USMC