

Telephoto NVGs



By Ltjg. Colin Boynton

Photo by Matthew J. Thomas

After four months of patrolling the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific night skies, looking for narcotics traffic from the front seat of an SH-60B, I was so used to flying on goggles I couldn't remember when the night sky wasn't green. My nugget cruise as an H2P was more than halfway done, and my logbook had more hours on NVGs than I had total LAMPS hours before going to sea. We were quite comfortable careening through the green-tinted night skies provided by our antiquated ANVS-6s.

As everyone knows, disaster always waits until you're nice and comfy, then it lashes out. Thanks to a heads-up, assertive aircraft commander and the boring CRM classes I managed

to stay awake for, we avoided a serious mishap one late afternoon in October. But, enough of the intro, let's jump into the cockpit of Proud Warrior 434.

I was flying with our detachment maintenance officer, a first-tour aircraft commander whom I'll call, Huey. We flew to burn hours to get into phase. Flying also gave us a break from the shoe madness. While our dual 401Cs converted JP-5 into noise and vibration, we engaged in valuable aircraft-commander training.

It's amazing how quickly time flies when your gray matter is being twisted into knots. Before I knew it, we had an hour to recovery, and the sun was down. We needed to update our quals on NVG DLQs, so we told the friendly OS1

on the other end of the Hawk Link we would fly an aided recovery.

I had the controls and turned west to head to our frigate. Normally, it is desirable to goggle-up at least 30 to 45 minutes before recovery. You want to be acclimated to the NVGs' small field of view and no depth perception before placing your rotor blades mere feet away from a steel hangar face. However, the astute reader will remember we were heading west, back to the ship. In which direction does the sun set, campers? That's right. So, while the rest of the sky was pitch black, with no moon illumination, the horizon in front of us still had far too much sky glow to goggle-up. Finally, 20 minutes from recovery, it was dark enough to use goggles.

Without a verbal cue, Huey and I set up our respective sides of the cockpit and donned our goggles. Huey joked, "We must have done this before." Our transition to goggled flight had none of the fumbling for switches and wrestling with lens covers that characterized our initial NVG operations.

Every time I prep for an NVG launch, I dial in my goggles to be focused and in the correct position before I get in the cockpit, paying particular attention to the distance the tubes are from my eyes. Our det OinC discovered early that positioning the goggles any significant distance from the eye gave him splitting headaches. However, since this was a daylight launch for an NVG recovery, I had not prepped my goggles—big mistake. En route to the ship, I focused them in and moved the tubes directly in front of my eyes, but I didn't notice the goggles were as far away from my eyes as the mounting bracket would allow.

Huey let me shoot the first and only approach, which was uneventful until we were over the poop deck. I immediately noticed the trap looked very far away, and my rate of closure looked slow, so I gently pushed the nose forward.

As we drifted toward a more familiar sight picture, Huey grabbed the controls and called, "Whoa! What are you doing? Too fast! Too fast!"

I stabilized the helo, suddenly cautious and very confused. What the hell was he talking about? I looked at how far away the hangar face was from the nose. We still had about 10 feet to go before we were in position to land.

Our AW2 announced, "Ready to land. Down. Down. Down."

I was befuddled. I wasn't about to lower the collective when I could see we were not in position. Realizing it was extremely unlikely both the other crewmen totally had lost it, I turned my head to the left and looked around the goggles at the deck environment. The green-deck lights painted an entirely different picture. I was directly over the forward edge of the trap, and any more forward motion would be distinctly unpleasant.

I lowered the collective and heard the LSO say, "In the trap. Trapped."

Huey said, "OK, I've got the controls."

I concurred and asked him to wait a second before lifting for the next bounce. My sight picture was all wrong, so I reached up to adjust the goggles. When I twisted the bracket's fore-and-aft-adjustment knob, I was startled by the results. It was like the zoom of a telephoto lens. As the goggles moved closer to my face, the hangar rushed forward at me. My perceived position on the deck went from tail wheel over the poop deck to slightly forward of the butt line—in two twists.

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Night-vision goggles are fabulous, but they are not infallible and are susceptible to operator error. Like everything in aviation, you need to preflight them and prep them the same way every time. The things you do "on the fly" should be kept to a minimum, especially in an operating environment as alien as NVG flight.

Crew-resource management and common sense will save your butt. If you have a crew of three, and it's obvious your perception does not mirror everyone else's, check yourself. Re-evaluate before acting, regardless of what your eyes tell you. In aviation, optical illusions are common and can be extremely dangerous. 

Ltjg. Boynton flies with HSL-42.