

Three weeks after the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, our ship transited the Straights of Gibraltar with the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* battle group. Tensions were high, and we were ready to do our part in the war on terrorism. Every flight felt like we were about to go into combat. We briefed every possible scenario we could think of and treated every contact as hostile until proven otherwise.

A few nights later, we launched one of our two SH-60Bs into a moonless night, looking for a Kilo class submarine transiting the surface. We briefed, preflighted, and read the ADB. Nothing stood out in the book, except an inop gimbal on the FLIR. Before start-up, I manually slewed the FLIR off the nose and up to an angle that seemed good. We goggled-up and launched. The FLIR remained in the same fixed position. The picture was working well, and we proceeded to VID contacts, using NVGs. We preferred using the goggles because it was a pain to find the contacts by moving the nose of the aircraft to move the FLIR.

As we looked at yet another group III merchant, we picked up a submarine radar with our ESM and went toward it. The chain of command gathered in CIC to watch the FLIR on one of the cruiser's large-screen displays. We did runs from every side, making sure we held to our standoff distances, but the ship wanted more. The tactical-action officer (TAO) came over Hawklink and started to dictate the angles he wanted.

Because the FLIR was fixed at a down angle, I had to climb to get more than a glimpse of the sub and still maintain my standoff. This plan worked: we got a few minutes of FLIR imagery. Again, the TAO came on the Hawk and wanted closer, lower angles on the FLIR.

Wanting to get all the video the ship asked for, my copilot and I decided we would make a run-in and lift the nose to get the fixed-FLIR

turret pointed at the sub. It worked like a charm, almost. My H2P was operating the FLIR, and I was flying right seat. Neither of us was looking at the instruments or outside. We had RadAlt hold engaged and were flying at 400 feet AGL. As he switched between wide and narrow views, I worked the nose to keep the sub in the center of the reticle. We were getting video.

Our aircrewman broke the silence with an earth-shattering question, "Are we backing down?"

We snapped our heads to the gauges, and, sure enough, airspeed showed zero, and HI-RAWS on the radar altimeter went off. For those of you non-60 bubbas, HI-RAWS is the "You're descending through 250 feet AGL" tone but without "Betty."

We both pushed the nose over and pulled an armpit full of collective. It seemed like an eternity before the rate of descent turned into a climb, and we started to see airspeed on the gauge. The TAO again called up as we were discussing our near-miss, and, with our hearts in our throats and our pride on the deck, we told him what had happened. We decided it was too

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risky to get more video that way, and we told them we were breaking contact. The ship agreed; they had enough video, and we finished the hop without incident.

A simple sensor degradation had caused both pilots to lose situational awareness and put the aircraft in extremis. After landing, we held an all-aircrew meeting and briefed the incident, so that it would not be repeated. Had it not been for an alert crewman, we very well could have put a perfectly good aircraft in the water. 

Lt. Greiner flies with HSL-48 Det 5.



Photo by Matthew J. Thomas, modified.

acking Down?

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By Lt. Bill Greiner