

Flying Off the Handle

by Lt. John Smolen

New to HC-2's "Desert Duck" UH-3H detachment in Bahrain, I was part of a CAG run for a personnel, mail, and cargo transfer to a couple small boys. With luck, we'd be back at the pool-deck by noon. I sat left seat with my OinC as pilot-in-command (PIC). Our first hit was to a forward-deployed ship, which had an H-46 det embarked.

We ran through the routine, got a sweet lock, and proceeded inbound on the "see you." I frantically scoured the NATOPS, trying to grab a reference for wind limits, while the PIC flew us toward the boat, talking me through her thought process. It was my first SLQ to this platform.

Tower called back, "Desert Duck Seven-Four-Zero, winds seventy degrees to starboard, you have a green deck." My boss requested the full spiel, as a red flag raised itself in her head. She flew in and took a closer look to both educate me and to check out the flight deck with such a wide wind envelope.

The flight deck was staged port side, wrapped all the way around aft across the centerline of the ship. The hangar doors were open. Because of the angled deck and because the ship was staged as it was, we only could fly starboard to port. The PIC called for them to

change their PIM and close their hangar doors. I asked a million questions—the pubs and boards hadn't prepared me for this situation.

We rolled final, I checked the lights, and she made the calls. I waved to indicate the other seat had the controls, and we began the approach. On final, I remarked that lots of flight-deck personnel weren't wearing the PPE you'd expect for a ship at flight quarters. As our main mounts crossed over the deck, I saw a long piece of plastic package strapping fly over my head into the rotors. I relayed this to the pilot, and she muttered that this wasn't the best of circumstances. Tower confirmed that something had been sucked into our rotors.

Several things hadn't entered my train of thought yet. My initial concern was that the plastic could impair some of the flight controls, melt and clog a servo or some other piece of equipment, and thereby make taking off, let alone flying, an iffy proposition. My HAC's thought process fanned out a bit wider into FOD, something I thought was reserved for a red-eyed walkdown first thing in the morning. Our crew chief was thinking along the same lines.

We elected to shut down (yes, I know, never shut down on a ship that you don't want to sleep on). The aircrew tackled the business at hand of



unloading and escorting the PMC load and investigating the rotor head upon shutdown. I expected my HAC to fly off the handle at the ship, the LSE, or me for not waving her off, but she didn't. The lesson learned here is never to second-guess the inclination to call a waveoff, especially in a critical flight regime. I'd thought about it but decided against it because she didn't seem startled by the incident. Wrong! She didn't seem startled because she was keeping her head. That was important—flying off the handle, as my parents used to say, was “closing the barn door after the cow has wandered off.” Control the things and people who can make the remainder of the situation more palatable. Losing your temper can break down ACT and make an already bad situation worse.

The flight-deck personnel wandered about the flight deck and conducted a critically late FOD walkdown. The crew chief inspected the rotor head and found that the plastic pieces had flown off during disengagement and were not in the rotor head or anywhere within the airframe. I broke out the checklist for engagement, and we spun up. The LSE began to talk to another crew member. I noticed after the walkdown that they had neglected to remove or secure a box directly in front of our nose. Our crew chief had to unstrap, climb out, get the LSE's attention, and remove the box.

We were given a green deck and lifted for a HOGE check. Under LSE and crewman direction, we slid right, only to have yet another piece of plastic fly up into the rotors, then to be batted down and into the ship's wake. We transitioned, sucked up the gear, and reported, “Ops normal.” My HAC's parting words to the tower were, “You guys are a mess!” My H2P brain was busy absorbing lessons for later when I'm the HAC encountering a mess. 

Lt. Smolen flies with HC-2.

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