

All This for Some Shrimp

By Lt. Joe Strassberger

We were off the coast of San Diego in late spring, on our second work-up before WestPac. I had been in the squadron for less than a year and had flown a minimal number of vertreps—very few at night. We were to deliver 15 pallets of supplies from our AOE to a cruiser in our battle group.

After several delays, the pinky-time vertrep soon changed to an

all-night effort. The seas were calm, and the moonlight was minimal, which meant no horizon. The ships were in conrep position, and, because we only needed 10 picks, we evaluated our situation and decided to proceed.

We briefed, preflighted, and got the aircraft staged on deck. We discussed how dark it was, and how we were unable to see the aircraft spotted on deck from the hangar.

Finally, our launch time came, and we started the aircraft. Given the extreme darkness, the

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crew talked about whether to continue with the flight. We were delayed on deck while the ships discussed whether to proceed with the evolution. We anxiously sat spinning on deck for 15 minutes while they assessed the situation. Time slowly ticked away, and the night grew darker. Eventually, the word came for us to launch.

We circled the ships and waited for everyone to get into position—while we still commented on how dark it was. Our crewman was in the hellhole and continually asked for our altitude and whether our alt hold was working. He was looking down through the hole, unable to tell if we were at five or 500 feet.

Finally, the ships were ready for us to begin. “No problem,” we thought; “10 picks, 15 loads, and we’ll be done in 15 or 20 minutes.”

I was in the left seat, so I would be doing the picks for the evening. I made the first approach with no problem—a standard straight-in, with a 90-degree sideflare. The HAC took the controls and made an easy drop.

Suddenly, everything went downhill—fast. As we slid sideways and away from the cruiser, we transferred controls. In front of me, all I could see were the yellow unrep lights by the fueling rigs and a few of the deck-perimeter lights. I could not make out the horizon, but I took the controls and began a 180-degree pivot. As vertigo set in, I couldn’t tell if I was level, nose high, or standing still. I suddenly realized we were in a left sideflare, heading toward the hangar. I quickly confessed I had vertigo and gave the controls to the HAC. He flew the aircraft out, leveled us, and gave the controls back to me.

I got reoriented and came in for the straight-in pick, and the HAC made the drop. Following the drop, the HAC again gave me the controls. This time, instead of doing a 180, I slid to the left and took it around for a teardrop. The HAC

and the crewmen questioned why I was doing such a wide pattern. I confessed that, on the last approach, I was confused and had no reference. Suddenly, I realized they had no idea I had vertigo when I earlier transferred controls. They thought the flight was going well; meanwhile, I had been in the left seat, not sure which way was up.

We took a lap in the pattern and talked about the situation. We decided to continue the flight, doing the teardrop pattern. Throughout the discussion and the remainder of the flight, the crew chief in the hellhole continued to ask for altitude readings. He was so nervous he needed constant reassurance. We finished the flight without incident.

While we shut down, I remembered what was in the pallets we just had moved. I jokingly asked the crew, “So, was all the excitement worth some frozen shrimp?” We eventually delivered their surf and turf for the next day’s dinner.

Looking back on this situation after the deployment, I saw many problems. First, while there was good discussion about the darkness and our altitude, there was a lack of communication when it was needed the most: when I had vertigo. No one else in the aircraft knew what I was feeling while I took back the controls and continued with the flight. It was one of my first night vertreps, and we were impatient as the ships considered whether to continue the evolution—we should have been more cautious. We wanted to quickly finish the small task and be done for the night. In the flight brief, no one discussed the importance or the urgency of the goods we were transporting. I now know the importance of proper risk management and to take things slowly on a challenging night. 🛩️

Lt. Strassberger flies with HC-11.