

t's the stuff we joke about in the wardroom while we wait for the AOM to start: "Hey, Pokey, you ready to try those boost-off autos on goggles tonight? When we're done, the moon will have set, so we can take off the NVGs and fly without the AFCS for awhile." Then we laugh hilariously at the prospect of such insane flying regimes, secretly hoping we never will have to deal with such a situation. Well, I had to, and sooner than expected.

The mission was night ASW, our specialty. We were chasing an underwater target and having a good time, using sonobuoys before moving in for the kill with the dipping sonar. We weren't wearing night vision goggles, and our aircraft wasn't configured for

Monkey Skills Pay Off

by Lt. Gabe Soltero

such flight. I'd made the mistake of taking off without the NVG kit, a homemade concoction of ordnance tape and glass that covers bright lights in the cockpit. On top of that, my helmet had malfunctioned during the hot-pump crew swap late that afternoon. I hadn't had enough time to fix it on the spot, so I had opted for a spare that wasn't wired for NVGs. I knew we had a hot pump scheduled in two hours, so I figured I'd get the kit and my helmet at that point. Until then, though, we'd be using the "old school" approach, as those dinosaurs who used to fly the H-3 like to say.

The sun set about 30 minutes into our flight, and we dropped the target in the water. We set up a buoy pattern and decided to work it for awhile, trying to get a good fix before dipping the sonar. This lasted about 45 minutes, at which point we started dipping. My sonar operator gained contact on our third dip and held a good track. Since the target was moving away, I directed my copilot to jump ahead and dip at a point where we would have a better shot.

Once the sonar dome was clear of the water, we departed the 60-foot hover, using the auto-



matic-departure function, a standard procedure for night ops. At about 100 feet and 40 knots, however, the aircraft suddenly became harder to control, and my copilot struggled to continue with the climb. One look at the caution panel told the story. We had a hydraulic leak in the aircraft. The leak-detection and isolation system had turned off the boost servos and the AFCS to prevent further loss of fluid.

I fumbled for my pocket checklist in the dark, hawking the altimeter and airspeed indicator to ensure we still were climbing and moving forward. After completing the procedures, I took the controls from my copilot. We had climbed to 2,000 feet in the process, higher than I had wanted, but a sure way to contact the carrier's approach controllers 30 miles away. I struggled to descend as we got closer. The partial loss of hydraulics kept the collective in the mid-position, so I had to fight it all the way. At the same time, we had no AFCS, so the helicopter was squirrely. It felt exactly the way it feels in the simulator: a hard-to-control aircraft and no

visible horizon. So I stuck to the basics: altitude, airspeed, attitude, and torque, grateful for those daytime flights in which we secured the AFCS for airwork drills.

I finally came down to 500 feet. I was high on the ball, but I got the aircraft over the wires and set it down. I knew that if the leak continued, I could have lost hydraulics entirely, and we would have gone swimming.

The pucker factor during this adventure would have been lessened if we had been wearing goggles, because they would have provided a visible horizon. In SH-60Fs that aren't compatible with NVGs, the onus is on pilots to ensure the kit is installed before flying at night. I allowed my helmet problems to take up too much of my attention and missed something that should have been obvious. Perhaps most importantly, I learned there's a good reason we put on the hoods and practice AFCS-off flight in the daytime whenever possible: It reinforces basic "monkey skills" that an easy-to-fly aircraft can tempt us to forget. 🦋

Lt. Soltero flies with HS-15.