



## Coast Guard Field Goal Yields **3 Points**

by LCdr. Jay Allen, USCG

Following tours in Cape Cod and Kodiak, I figured a tour in San Diego was going to be a snap. I was eagerly looking forward to much better weather and the challenge of teaching nuggets. That task, I figured, would be far less demanding than the radar navigation, sea states, and low visibility I was used to. The air station was transitioning from being an HU-25 Falcon and HH-65 Dolphin unit to an HH-60J Jayhawk unit, so several seasoned pilots were ordered in to have the unit up and running as soon as possible.

During the next four years, the glamour of flying in southern California began to wear off. At about the same time, we started to see our first young jaygees straight from Pensacola and Mobile,

which is the Coast Guard's Aviation Training Center, home for HU-25, HH-65 and HH-60J transition courses.

One gorgeous, sunny, Friday morning, the mission had a twist: shoot up the coast to Camp Pendleton and land in a football field just south of the Oceanside VORTAC. We were to brief and work with some Marines on "casting out" of an HH-60. The Marines had plenty of practice out of the back of H-46s, but we were a target of opportunity. We welcomed the break from the pattern at Imperial Beach and flying offshore law enforcement.

One high recon of the field and we had it scoped. The Marines were waiting by their trucks on the south side of the field; the goal posts on the east and west ends of the field were no problem, and there were bleachers to the north. On our low recon to a landing, our flight mechanic gave us tail clearance as we came in. A small dust cloud worked its way forward as we touched down at midfield in a no-hover landing. Ah, just like days of whiteouts in snow up north, except I wasn't wearing wool socks or thinking about pulling out my Air Force winter cap once I took off my helmet.

During the brief, I told the Marines that we'd be doing it more Coast Guard-ish than they were used to. Instead of maintaining 10 knots forward speed at 10 feet, we would come to brief hovers at each deployment and wait for their thumbs-up before moving forward for the next deployment.

One maximum performance takeoff and we went to the scene. The poor guys were getting kicked around swimming out through the surf, but they were soon in position. We hoisted groups of five into the cabin, then they made their freefall

returns to the water just outside the surfline. Most of these gents hadn't been hoisted before and were coming up on the bare hook since they were all wearing approved harnesses with D-rings. We could hear the "hoots" while they were still outside the cabin door before the flight mechanic brought them in. Four groups, no problems, lots of fun, and we were done with the first half of the mission. It was on to Imperial Beach for some day bounce work. "You have the controls," I said, as we climbed to transit altitude for heading down the beach.

"Let's go back and debrief," the flight mechanic offered. I was skeptical about the benefits of this plan, but I suspected it was just to hear how much fun they had. The hop was going quickly, and another shutdown and startup weren't going to break our schedule. I radioed the POC on the ground and told him we wanted to come back in and conduct a quick hotwash.

"No problem, we'll be assembled in short order."

"Can I make the landing?" my new copilot asked.

"Sure," I confidently replied. I knew that, unless the syllabus had changed significantly, each transitioned pilot into the HH-60J had, at least, landed once on a baseball diamond at Mobile. With trees around it, no less. Surely a football field wasn't a big deal.

The first approach was a bit hot and shallow, and I called for the go-around at 150 feet. No big deal—this was exactly why I'd come to San Diego in the first place, and I was finally getting my chance. We discussed on downwind to just hit the numbers for a good steep approach, establish a good sight picture and bleed off airspeed at a nice rate, then bring in power early to get the descent rate under control.

The second approach was much better. Nice sight angle, maybe a little short on the intended point of landing, but we

were flying the aircraft, not just going along for a ride.

"How's our clearance on the goalpost?" I asked. There was a pregnant pause, and my anxiety level took a major leap to FL100. "Hold your descent, hold your descent, hold your descent!"

The aircraft continued to descend! This couldn't be happening. I was on the controls pulling 132 percent for one second, until I felt like we were on the proverbial HH-60 elevator ride to the top. I then managed to lower the collective to within continuous limits as we hurtled to 1,000 feet amid a dust cloud. In the pull, I heard a "thump" and concluded that the tailwheel must have gone to full extension and hit a lower stop as a result of the ascent rate. I queried the crew, and no one else admitted to hearing the sound. The flight mechanic was sure we'd cleared the western goalpost by 10 feet.

"Sorry for the confusion. We'll RTB at this time," I radioed to the POC on the ground. No suggestion from the ground that anything was amiss, so we signed off and started discussing the



overtorque. It occurred to me that I hadn't read about too many HH-60 overtorques in *Approach* magazine.

We headed down the coast discussing our alternatives. Palomar and Oceanside airports were within five miles, Camp Pendleton was about 15. We raised maintenance control on FM and told them about our condition. A quick search through the maintenance pubs and we were informed that no maintenance action is required, just an entry on the 4377. See—you can't overtorque an HH-60!

Well, training being the better part of valor, I said that we'd pull up our bootstraps and head down to Imperial Beach to give the young man some time to "get back in the air," as they said in "Top Gun." A good hour in the pattern and we were back on deck. We looked into the maintenance manuals for ourselves and were off to the galley, no message required, just the entry in the aircraft record.

I was out on patrol the next day. I leisurely discussed the previous day's events with another pilot (who was new to the air station) and the crew to generate some lessons learned. Two hours later, we were back on deck and our rescue swimmer, a most conscientious man, asked, "Sir, did anyone actually check the tail?"

"You know, I'm not sure. Let's be sure to take a look after we shut down." Well, what do you know: yellow paint and a missing rivet head just aft of the folding hinge. Unbelievable. I mean, it was less of a scrape than you'd get by having a shopping cart run into your car at Home Depot, but it was there.

Back into the manuals, deeper this time. The deformation was within limits, and the forward structural member of the pylon wasn't touched, so it was just a new non-structural rivet and an 8-inch paint job; \$10 in parts, \$64 in labor and a mishap message, my first as PIC in more than 11 years flying. A wake-up call for me, and, since we had executed a helicopter version of a field goal, three points for the crew and community.

First, evaluate the comfort level and readiness of a crew faced with flight maneuvers that demand a heightened state of hazard awareness and crew resource management. I ass-u-me-d that this pilot

would have no problem landing on a football field based on my expectations of a newly transitioned pilot. It never occurred to me to discuss such basics as landing long in the zone. We had just done it about 45 minutes earlier, so surely we could do it again. I was slow asking the crew to provide clearance information up front, a delay that proved crucial. It was entirely possible the goalpost upright could have punctured the pylon or skewered the tail stinger and pivoted us over on our nose. Lesson learned: No maneuver is too basic not to brief in detail.

Second, I was the only one who heard a thump. Ignoring the possibility that we'd hit something, I searched my databank for possibilities: the tailwheel strut, items falling in the cabin? I now know the strut is fully extended when in flight—it can't extend any farther. But my suggestion of this explanation, coupled with the fact that no one else heard it or countered my conclusion, allowed this aircraft to be flown for more than three hours before discovery of the mishap.

Third, in this case, we were able to consult with maintenance personnel immediately and get a read on what damage our overtorque might have caused. What about the good old PEL and a landline? We had three airports within five minutes to which we could have flown and shut down for further analysis. I'm not sure we would have discovered the scrape during a walk-around. It wasn't discovered on the following post-flight, but only upon a detailed inspection of the tail the next day. Although not an emergency, what other situations may call for the more prudent action of landing and discussing? In this case, a maintenance control "release" allowed me to relax. Aircraft commanders have the authority to make decisions on the spot, but it also helps to take advantage of the available chain of command. Lesson learned: Err to the conservative, and you'll live longer.

As a result of this incident, I am finally assuming the responsibility for which I came to San Diego in the first place. The unit is about half seasoned and half nugget now, and I can honestly say I'm enjoying my one-year extension of challenging flying in this tropical clime. 🇺🇸

LCdr. Allen flies HH-60Js at USCGAS San Diego.