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The accidental release of their rubber boat from a helicopter while it flew 167 feet above the water likely persuaded a pair of SEALs to jump from too great a height, killing one and injuring another. That was the conclusion drawn from the Navy's JAG investigation into the March 9, 2000, mishap near the Bahamas.

While SEALs are trained to immediately follow their boat into the water, they normally do so from about 10 feet in the air and only after a direct command.

Rear Adm. Eric T. Olson, Commander Naval Special Warfare Command and the Navy's top SEAL, said in the JAG investigation that a culmination of factors led the two SEALs to believe the helicopter was flying lower and slower than it was. [*The Virginian-Pilot* obtained a copy of the report from the COS of SpecWar in San Diego through the Freedom of Information Act.—Ed.]

The accident's fundamental causes, Olson said, "were insufficient situational awareness" and a "predisposition by both men to exit the helicopter prior to receiving a positive 'go' signal from the assigned castmaster."

The impact killed an HM1 and seriously injured an OS2. The injured man, even though he suffered serious internal injuries, continues to recover and is expected to return to full duty.

The mishap occurred about 2200, March 9, near the Bahamas where two Army helicopters were to have conducted a "cast insertion" of eight SEALs in support of Exercise Bow Drawn.

The plan called for a pair of MH-60 helicopters to drop two rubber boats into the water, followed by eight SEALs. They were to have rendezvoused with a coastal patrol craft to continue their infiltration of a beach.

SEALs term the type of maneuver the "Kangaroo Duck," or "K-Duck," procedure. It was developed as a rapid insertion method from that class of helicopters while they hover low over the water.

At the insertion point, the pilot orders the release of the boat, and the swimmers cast out the door.

A "cut-strap" is used to release the boat. And a SEAL team member is assigned as the "cut-man" to slice through the strap on

command from the "castmaster," who receives his instructions via a radio headset connected to the pilot.



Early Release Blamed in Death

Photo composite by Patricia Eaton

According to investigators, the cut-man positioned himself to cut the strap by kneeling behind it.

He did not have a radio headset, and his view of the castmaster was somewhat obstructed by a Bahamian observer sitting in the center of the passenger compartment.

The cut-man grabbed the strap with his left hand and held a hooked knife in his right, while balancing in the helicopter cabin, the report found.

The pilot was slowing the aircraft into a high hover, watching for the other helicopter to drop its boat first.

The report did not explain why, but the strap holding the boat was cut, and the boat fell prematurely. The cut-man said he had no knowledge or recollection of the knife hitting the strap, investigators said.

Olson, in his comments about the investigation, said the inexperience of the cut-man was a contributing factor to the accident, “aggravated by the fact that he was not wearing a headset and was therefore subject to the same misleading sequence of events that influenced the two SEALs to exit early.

“His anticipation of an imminent ‘cut’ signal was premature, which may have led to inadvertent severing of the shear strap,” Olson said.

The two men left the aircraft immediately after the boat.

Although a “go” signal is supposed to be given from the castmaster before the jumpers leave the aircraft, none was given, according to the report.

“Within seconds of hearing and feeling the boat depart the aircraft and getting word from the crew chiefs that jumpers had left the aircraft, an emergency was declared...,” investigators said.

“I keyed my (microphone) and announced ‘Stop them. Stop them. Stop them,’” recalled an Army staff sergeant, one of the aircrewmembers in the helicopter.

He told investigators it looked like a third man on his side of the helicopter was preparing to jump, too. “I jumped from my seat,” said the sergeant, “screamed ‘Stop’ as loud as I could. My goggles were knocked off, and I vaguely remember landing on top of the third man.”

The helicopter made a quick 180-degree turn, passed over the target area and immediately located the two men in the water.

Two other SEALs entered the water and immediately began giving the injured SEALs emergency aid.

A safety boat from the patrol craft arrived within three minutes, the investigation reports.

The HM1 was found face up with no pulse or respiration. The OS2 had managed to swim to the rubber boat and climbed aboard.

Both men were quickly aboard the patrol craft and in a race to save their lives.

The four-engine craft, capable of speeds in excess of 40 mph, headed for the Navy’s Autec Range, near Nassau in the Bahamas. Communications were established with a doctor. It took an hour for the craft to get to the range; in total, cardiopulmonary resuscitation was performed on the HM1 for more than two hours, the report found.

“The patrol craft did everything but destroy itself to get back,” said one officer.

“They nearly ran it into the ground to get us back,” said the platoon’s commander. “The engine room was blue with smoke... with men pouring five-gallon buckets of oil on the diesels... running as fast as they could” to get the SEALs to safety.

The HM1 was declared dead by a physician when the patrol craft reached the Autec Range.

The OS2 was evacuated by aircraft to Miami. 

Jack Dorsey specializes in writing on military matters for *The Virginian-Pilot*.

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