Grampaw Pettibone

From the mailbag:

Gonzo Mouse

The crew of the SH-3 helo briefed for what we thought was to be a routine night IFR ASW/plane guard mission. The launch was to include two SH-3 helos which would alternate in the plane guard role.

Arriving on the flight deck, we found that our aircraft had not yet been spotted for launch due to a fuel contamination problem. When the fuel problem was resolved, the aircraft was positioned for launch on spot #5, aft of the island structure. The second helo was up and ready for launch on spot #4. Preflight and engine turnup were normal except that the launch was behind schedule and things were getting a bit rushed.

The landing signal enlisted (LSE) director gave the signal to spread the rotor blades. The #3 main rotor blade had no blade walker and was bouncing off the flight deck as a result of the launching helo rotor wash. The rotor blade was inspected with no damage noted. The #2 engine was then started and rotors were engaged.

The other helo, already airborne, informed the air boss that it was unable to perform the plane guard mission due to a malfunctioning doppler system.

Just as we prepared to launch, the #1 engine turbine inlet temperature became excessive. The aircraft was then downed and the mad rush was on.

People were running everywhere in an attempt to ready another helo for the plane guard mission. The LSE and I attempted to unlock and spread the folded tail of the second helo. The LSE stood upon the tow bar and attempted to secure the tail pylon. I gave the tow tractor driver a signal to hold; however, he started the helo moving with the LSE still standing on the tow bar. I yelled to the driver to stop but the aircraft handler

shouted "no time" and ordered the driver to "move it."

The LSE jumped clear and the aircraft was towed forward to spot #1 with the tail section swinging free. The deck was "hot" with aircraft holding for launch on catapults #3 and #4 until a plane guard was airborne.

A rushed preflight was conducted in the dark conditions of the flight deck. After the #1 engine was started and rotor blades were spread, I climbed up to check the rotor head. The pilot waved me back down before this check was completed. I closed the transmission platform door as the #2 engine was started. The second crewman then informed me that the rescue hoist was down because of cable entanglement (bird's nest) and that the aircraft handlers broke the tail wheel locking pin while removing the tow bar. The metal locking pin could not be found and was now FOD rolling somewhere about the deck.

The LSE signaled to engage the rotors and the pilot told me to "button it up." We launched shortly thereafter and, as we cleared the bow, the air boss passed a "good job" to the crew.

The launch resumed. As we proceeded to plane guard position, we discovered that this aircraft was also down because of a bad gyro and that there were no life rafts aboard. To top it all off, we had to land right after the launch was completed to take on fuel to finish the flight. This hurry-up situation developed into a disorganized, unsafe evolution with a down aircraft with down SAR capability flying the night plane guard mission and, in all this chaos, the crew never saw the aircraft log books.

All I ask is, Gramps, what does it take?

Signed,
Gonzo Mouse

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Great jumpin' Jehoshaphat! It seems that Gonzo Mouse was more like a trapped rat in this fiasco.

This episode reminds me of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, except it had only one piper. This orchestration appeared to have several pipers, each playing a lot of sour notes in an effort to march Gonzo Mouse and company over the steel cliff and into the sea, much like the ill-fated rats of Hamelin.

Fortunately, this fiasco resulted in no mishap or injury. And like Gonzo Mouse, Old Gramps also wonders just what does it take? All it should have taken in this case was for one of several bandmasters to call this parade temporarily to a halt.

The tempo of ops and the scramble to complete the launch prompted a few hazardous shortcuts here and resulted in a serious breakdown in supervision.

This series of events normally occurs so insidiously that it becomes noticed only after calamity has struck.

ILLUSTRATED BY Osborn

From this, one may surmise that it's sometimes wise for the air boss to advise: "Let's take five and stay alive!"

The grim reaper had this gang well under way toward construction of a better mousetrap but, thanks to Lady Luck, it didn't slam shut.

An Anonymous Concern

Dear Gramps,

While on detachment from a CH-46 helicopter combat support squadron to an overseas-based auxiliary fleet support ship, I observed an incident which warrants a note to and perhaps a comment from Gramps.

Late one evening the ship encountered deteriorating weather conditions involving moderate winds and rough seas, which caused the ship to roll 15 to 20 degrees, with occasional roll to 25 degrees. Both of the CH-46 *Sea Knights* were airborne, conducting touch-and-go landing practice. It must be emphasized that this was a training, not an operational exercise.

True to Murphy's Law, conditions, which were marginal, worsened with darkness and recommendations by flight crews to secure operations were discounted by the officer in charge stationed in the tower. A short time later, one of the helo aircraft commanders (HAC) decided to terminate his mission when it became apparent that his copilot (pilot at controls) was experiencing increased difficulty in safely landing on the pitching deck.

Once on deck, the helicopter was secured. Attempts to push it into the hangar were severely hampered by the ship's movement. During one particular roll, the aircraft almost broke free from the handlers.

Meanwhile, the second helo continued to operate, making practice touch and goes. This was the pilot in command's first flight as an H-46 HAC during actual ship operations. The copilot, who was also HAC-qualified (with more than double the pilot's flight time), strongly opposed continuing the operation. However, he was junior to the pilot in command.

The HAC was experiencing significant trouble in landing. On several occasions, the helo touched down with sufficient lateral drift so that it skipped across the deck. This evolution continued approximately 30 minutes before the operation was terminated.

During the movement of the second helo into the hangar, the excessive roll of the ship caused it to slide out of control across the deck. Aircraft braking had little effect and crew members stood by for an inevitable "dunk in the drink." Fortunately, the ship reversed its roll and the handlers quickly chained the aircraft after it had made an 80-degree left turn and stopped just short of the edge.

Incidents of this nature require safety reports, yet the event went unreported. Perhaps this letter may help prevent similar incidents from happening again. Gramps, we sure were lucky this time.

Anonymous

Grampaw Pettibone says:

Holy sufferin' *Sea Knights*! This fiasco qualifies for the center ring of Barnum and Bailey with billing as C. C. Knight and the Sliding Yo-Yos.

There is enough meat in this pot of stew for us all to say grace over, starting with the OinC, HACs (both old and new), copilots, deck handlers, etc. Somebody should have been screaming like a mashed cat to knock this off! Operating a non-carrier-based HC detachment at sea involves the same responsibilities and risks to men and machines as operating aboard the carrier. Unlike on the carrier, it is conducted in more confined spaces and with only a handful of experienced aviation personnel. Every man here is truly his brother's keeper, not to mention, his own!

I question the accuracy of the author's assessment of the ship's roll at 25 degrees; however, I appreciate the sheer fright-at-night conditions under which it was made. Most importantly, I question the wisdom of conducting practice touch-and-go landings under conditions where hardware is sliding uncontrollably about the deck — whether it be 25, 20, or whatever degrees of roll.

Based upon the information provided, I can find no requirement to formally report such an incident, except via the anonymous report, since no damage, injury, or forced flight abort occurred.

If the conditions in this evolution were as stated, this crotchety old Monday morning quarterback agrees with the author — they were indeed lucky this time. To expose one's assets to these elements for such unnecessary risks is not at all conducive to perpetuation of the exposee's future performance as a Monday morning quarterback or on "Saturday Night Live!"

Old Gramps shares synonymous concern with the anonymous concern of this author. Your letter is gratefully appreciated. Hopefully, it will serve to prevent similar incidents from occurring.