



SAR JUMPS FOR BRIDCAGE FOR ONE

By AW2 Bryce J. Williams

During the beginning stages of Operation Enduring Freedom, USS *Cowpens* and HSL-51 Det 2 were working in the Guam area. Most of our time was spent working on qualifications and preparing for the global war on terrorism. Little time was left for unit-level training, especially for the helicopter detachment.

On Sep. 28, 2001, we had an opportunity to conduct SAR jumps for our SH-60B detachment aircrewmembers. Anyone who ever has been to Guam knows most days have near-perfect weather. This day was no exception: no clouds and clear visibility for miles. Most importantly, at least for SAR jumps, the water temperature was 82 degrees Fahrenheit. The beautiful tropical waters and warm weather beckon everyone to take a swim. Today, however, only the detachment AWs were going to get the privilege. We were the envy of all the crew.

Beginning with the brief, the aircraft commander made sure everyone knew the mission details, the ORM

assessment was complete, and all safety precautions were in place. We discussed jump profiles and potential emergencies. We had no idea we would respond to an actual emergency.

The jumps were set up near the port bow of the ship to give bridge observers a good view. The jump profile was 10 feet and 10 knots; one tap on the shoulder, release the gunner's belt; three taps, jump, jump, jump, swimmer away, swimmer OK. The first jump was uneventful. With the swimmer back in the aircraft, we set up for the second jump. It didn't go as smoothly.

The swimmer lost one of his fins when he hit the water. He was able to find the missing fin but couldn't put it on. The swimmer gave a frustrated pickup signal, and, when he signaled he was hooked up, I started to raise the hoist. Everything looked good as I lifted him from the water, but, as he cleared the water, he started to spin counterclockwise. As I continued to lift him, the spinning accelerated, and he started swinging around the circumference of the helo. I tried to counteract the swinging motion by stopping the hoist. This stopped his swinging, but he kept spinning.

I told the pilot what was happening and what I was doing to assist the swimmer. I motioned the swimmer

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to kick back his fin to stop the rotation, but this move created more confusion. Since the swimmer almost was to the helo and appeared to be under control, the pilot had me continue to lift. The swinging began again but not as badly. I stopped the hoist just below the helo and tried to stop his spinning and swinging. The swimmer then grabbed the mainmount, and the motion stopped. I helped him inside the cabin, made sure he was OK, and prepared for forward flight.

The swimmer still was a little shaken, even after he was settled in the cabin—and rightfully so. The two of us decided this was a good time to switch roles; he would be the hoist operator, and I would be the swimmer. Neither of us thought about taking a couple of extra minutes to inspect the hoist and see if it was damaged or birdcaged. The swimmer still was clearing his head from the spin, and I was anxious to get in the water. Had we taken the time to inspect the hoist, things may have turned out differently.

The helo set up for another jump profile, and the jump was a success. I hit the water and realized what being in the tropics is all about. The ocean was like a warm bath; it felt incredible. I would have been just as happy to call off the jumps, so I could have taken some time to enjoy the water, but, of course, the “show must go on.”

I passed the pickup signal, and the hoist came down without a hitch. After hookup, I gave the raise-hoist signal and left the water. As I went up, I looked at the ship and saw the detachment’s personnel watching us from the bow. It felt good knowing they got to see what we do for a living. Then the hoist stopped.

I looked up to see I was just 20 feet below the helo (60 feet above the water) when my junior aircrewman gave me the hoist-jammed signal. The first thing that went through my head was he must be playing with me. If the cable broke, I would fall 60 feet into the water. I also realized the hook was below the level of my head. I thought it was possible that when I hit the water, the hook could swing back, hit me in the head, and possibly knock me out. I now fully realized how dangerous this situation was.

I saw the hoist operator pull what looked like the cable cutters out of the SAR bag and stage them by the door. I later learned it actually was the Chicago grip,

which is used to keep a damaged cable attached to the aircraft.

I thought the hoist operator was going to cut the cable, instead of trying to fix the hoist. I quickly gave the PC signal for hover down. I did not want to be cut from that altitude!

The helo began to descend. I was not sure how low they planned to go, so, with all my strength, I grabbed the top of the hook and pulled up. I overlaced my fingers on top of the hook, opened the locking gate with my thumbs, and released myself from the hook. I fell, back first, into the water.

Now that I look back on the situation, I never should have tried to get out of the hoist. With all that adrenaline pumping, I didn’t realize I had no depth perception when looking at the water. I should have waited until my feet hit the water before I worried about getting off the hoist. This situation could have been discussed better during the ORM brief, so the whole crew would have been on the same page.

I looked up at the helo and gave the OK signal. The helo moved to the left to keep an eye on me as they radioed to the ship to send the rigid-hull inflatable boat (RHIB). It was a little embarrassing, as an aviation-rescue swimmer, to be rescued by the ship’s RHIB. I rather would have swam to the ship and climbed aboard, but this ride was my only ticket back. The hoist operator hauled in the rest of the cable and secured it to the helo.

After the helo landed and I returned on board, I discovered the cable was severed in three places, and several gears were torn off completely. The only thing keeping me in the air was that cable, which had pinched between the two main gears.

I’m very relieved the hoist operator followed the NATOPS procedures. If he had continued to use the hoist after it jammed, the cable easily could have separated. Had we examined the hoist before the next attempt, we may have noticed something was wrong, which would have prevented my hanging helpless 60 feet above the water. I’m glad the crew lowered me to the water, near the awaiting RHIB. Everyone got back to the ship, but, had this event been an actual open-ocean SAR, the outcome could have been far different. 

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