



# Landing Out of Limits

By LCdr. Doug Thompson

**W**e were 10 minutes from flight quarters when the lights went out. The “lights” usually refer to aircraft power, but not this time.

I was the OinC of an HSL detachment doing escort operations in the Bab el Mandeb, in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. I was the HAC, and we were to locate and escort a certain ship. We found it 20 miles in front of our *Spruance*-class destroyer, heading in the opposite direction. The plan was to have the ships rendezvous; then, our ship would turn 180 degrees to join on the escorted ship. I would land, get a hot pump, and relaunch for a second bag. This flight was the second of two escorts for the det that day, and each crew had to double up as each escort mission took six to eight hours. It was late afternoon and sunny but very hazy with blowing sand. The visibility was four to five miles.

So, there we were, 10 minutes away from flight quarters, when the lights went out—on the ship! It was maneuvering to a reciprocal heading, when suddenly, it stopped turning. We then lost our signal for datalink (our primary secure comms), and I knew something was wrong with the ship. We had 45 minutes of fuel left.

I called the ship on land-launch but had no joy. We had maritime bridge-to-bridge frequency in the No. 2 radio to talk with the civilian ship we were escorting. After waiting five minutes to see if our ship could come back on-line, I called mom on channel 16 to establish comms. I learned the ship had suffered a major engineering casualty and literally was cold and dark. They couldn't correct the problem and get underway again for at least an hour. Now down to 30 minutes of fuel, we told the ship to set flight quarters by whatever means possible. We realized our options were extremely limited. No other ships were within reach (we were

escorting a group III cargo ship), and diverting to Yemen or Eritrea to land on unprepared terrain wasn't inviting. Mom was our only option.

Here's the rub, to quote George Costanza: “The sea was angry that day, my friends.” Winds had howled all day at a steady 30 to 40 knots. The ship was beam-to-the-wind when it went DIW and stayed there; it was rocking and rolling pretty good. (Wind envelopes for tail-rotor-equipped aircraft primarily are formulated with the winds off the bow to help maintain tail-rotor effectiveness). With the ship foundering broadside to the wind, our relative winds were 050 to 060 degrees relative to the ship at 30 to 40 knots, well outside the SH-60B envelope.

The SH-60B NATOPS has a diagram in chapter 11, dreamed up at Pax River, which describes the bad things that can happen when you land with relative winds from positions other than in the envelope. We discussed these issues and had our SENSO pull out the NATOPS in the cabin and back us up. We were facing possible loss of tail-rotor effectiveness because of the tail-rotor-AOA reduction and the dreaded weather-vaning effect. We verified flight quarters were set via the bridge, and we discussed our options.

With 20 minutes of fuel left, I decided to shoot a left-to-right approach, instead of the normal up-the-stern approach, to keep the nose into the wind as long as possible. I then would pedal turn and set the aircraft on deck. If it didn't feel or look good, I would wave off to starboard and try again. Once cleared via the bridge, I commenced the approach and flew it with no trouble. After completing the pedal turn, the pedals felt a little mushy, but I quickly landed, and we shut down uneventfully. The winds barely were under the 45-knot-maximum limit for disengagement.

I know what you're thinking—an anticlimatic ending to a promising start of the article. However, many things can be learned from this story. Navy ships do break and can leave you in trouble with nowhere to go, particularly in the world of LAMPS.

What if this had happened at night? We would have had to conduct an NVG approach and land on a ship with no deck or hangar-face lights, in hazy conditions, and with severely limited visibility. Sounds like fun, right?

As pilots, we early are taught to play the “what if” game. By using all our assets and acting collectively as a crew, we turned a bad day into an uneventful landing. Keep learning how to play the game because the rules keep changing. 🛩️

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