

by LCdr. Jeffrey Barta

It wasn't your typical dark night around the boat. In fact, it was clear with a full moon and an O-4's horizon—the kind of night when you can look up and see all the way to eternity. The kind of night when you'd never have to worry about flying the helo into the water.

We were into our second month of cruise, doing the usual LAMPS stuff of VIDing every contact within range of mother while looking for drug smugglers in the western Pacific. I was new to LAMPS MK III, having previously flown the SH-2F. As a senior lieutenant, I was flying with one of the more junior HACs on the det, along with a brand-new but otherwise outstanding AW.

We had been flying for about three hours and were checking our final contact of the night before heading back home to hot seat and hit the auto-dog. The VID went well, especially with such great visibility. Our coupled approach and hover went flawlessly. We got the required alpha-report info and automatically departed. Showing four good rates of climb, safe single-engine airspeed and the stablator programming, I buried my head in the multi-purpose display (MPD) to set up a fly-to point back home. All seemed well.

Without saying anything, the HAC disengaged the automatic departure going through 200 feet and applied a good amount of forward cyclic to increase airspeed quicker. As I worked on the MPD, something didn't seem right, so I looked up and saw the radar altimeter descending rapidly through 75 feet. I yelled "Power!" and yanked up on the collective as we heard the Low RAWS tone ringing in our ears at 35 feet. We bottomed out at around 15 feet and looked at each other as we climbed.

"Boy, that was a close one" was all the HAC could say. Like me, the AW in back had been busy running his radar, and hadn't noticed our descent. SH-60B NATOPS warns us about applying forward cyclic too rapidly when accelerating, because the AFCS altitude-hold functions can disengage and stay off. The HAC had done just that and traded altitude for airspeed without even noticing it.

But it wasn't just the HAC's fault; it was mine and the AW's as well. In our rush to set things up and get home, we had forgotten the basic crew-coordina-

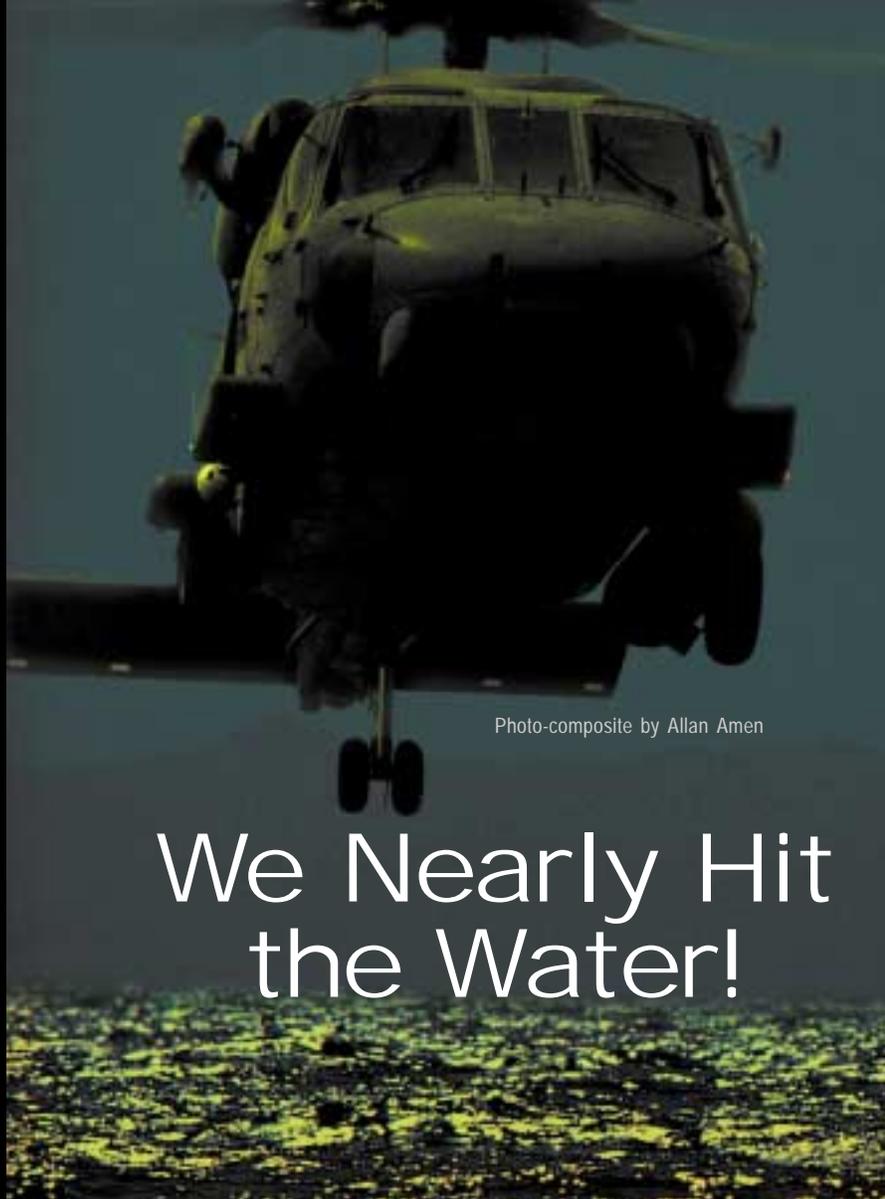


Photo-composite by Allan Amen

## We Nearly Hit the Water!

tion skill of situational awareness. We all thought we were climbing and, had failed to back each other up on the gauges.

As a result of near mishaps and some real mishaps from such lapses, SH-60B NATOPS now contains a brief item for "Night/IMC Descent Over Water." Although written for a descent, the principles apply for climbs as well. In addition, the LAMPS core-SOP prohibits night VIDs in a hover below 200 feet unless absolutely necessary, with the automatic-approach checklist having to be completed above 500 feet before the descent begins. We pulled it out and learned some valuable lessons. Perception isn't always reality, and there's no such thing as "Just another night around the boat." 

LCdr. Barta was in HSL-47 at the time of this incident. He is now an OinC with HSL-51.