

This Ain't *No Kid's Story*

by Lt. Joe Amaral

I had been embarked in the USS Sacramento (AOE-1) for more than two months on a WestPac deployment when the story about the emperor's new clothes vividly came to mind.

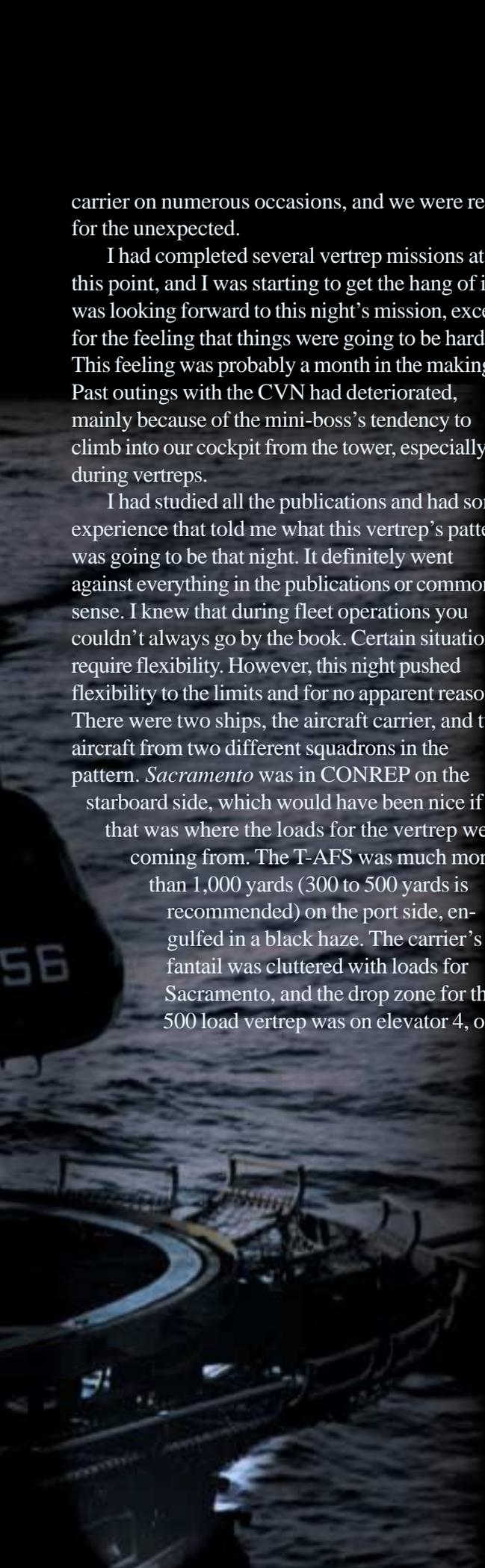
Our detachment was doing much of the air logistics runs for the carrier battle group. I was a fledgling "Gunbearer," a few months out of the FRS, yet I was well into a crash course in the nature of our mission and our life in the fleet.

My HACs were teaching me the commitment to mission accomplishment that was our squadron's hallmark, and I was inundated with our can-do attitude for every mission, including mail and passenger transfers, medevacs, and of course, vertical replenishment. Vertrep is the HC community trademark, and I learned quickly that it was the mission of choice for an H-46D pilot. These hops are pure stick-and-rudder, seat-of-the-pants flying, which all

HC pilots look forward to doing day or night.

It was an all-too-typical night in the Persian Gulf—pitch-black, hazy and hot. There was no horizon, and our task was a long vertrep with the carrier. We had worked with this

PH1 Troy Summers



carrier on numerous occasions, and we were ready for the unexpected.

I had completed several vertrep missions at this point, and I was starting to get the hang of it. I was looking forward to this night's mission, except for the feeling that things were going to be hard. This feeling was probably a month in the making. Past outings with the CVN had deteriorated, mainly because of the mini-boss's tendency to climb into our cockpit from the tower, especially during vertreps.

I had studied all the publications and had some experience that told me what this vertrep's pattern was going to be that night. It definitely went against everything in the publications or common sense. I knew that during fleet operations you couldn't always go by the book. Certain situations require flexibility. However, this night pushed flexibility to the limits and for no apparent reason. There were two ships, the aircraft carrier, and two aircraft from two different squadrons in the pattern. *Sacramento* was in CONREP on the starboard side, which would have been nice if that was where the loads for the vertrep were coming from. The T-AFS was much more than 1,000 yards (300 to 500 yards is recommended) on the port side, engulfed in a black haze. The carrier's fantail was cluttered with loads for *Sacramento*, and the drop zone for the 500 load vertrep was on elevator 4, on

the port side of the carrier, right behind an FA-18 (the only aircraft on the entire deck).

"Is this for real?" I asked my HAC. "The only aircraft on the entire deck is ten feet from where he wants the loads dropped."

Most ships get into position and let the aircraft commanders figure out the pattern. Not that night. The mini-boss's plan was to simultaneously transfer the 400 loads from the T-AFS, then, after each drop at the carrier, pick up a retrograde load from its fantail and drop it on *Sacramento*.

As hard as it is to explain, it was even harder to understand at the time. This pattern didn't allow us to keep the other aircraft or the LSE in sight and had us backing up 300 feet to the carrier's fantail, with little or no visual cues to pick a retro-load. This pattern allowed no ability to see what flight-deck personnel, forklifts, or cargo might be in our way, let alone determine the other aircraft's position in the pattern.

From the first approach in the pattern for a pick (hooking up the load), I knew it was going to be a long night. The HAC had started a descent one mile from the stern of the T-AFS for the first

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approach. Somewhere around 75 feet off the water with a 700-fpm descent rate, a half-mile from the ship, I grabbed the collective, pulled power and said, "You need to tell me about descents like that!" I suspected the HAC had some

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an auto did not even occur to me...until he did. I didn't see him do it this time, I just watched the No. 1 power-turbine speed and turbine-gas temperature drop down. I said, "Looks like number one has low-sided."

"Good catch, simulated failure," he replied.

I said, "Roger," and thought, "Well, I expected this, right? He'll back me up, right? Everyone I talked to said this is no big deal, right?"

As I started flaring at the bottom to 35 degrees, nose up, he realized that I wasn't going to wave off, and he ran the engine back up to give us the extra power we'd need in about two seconds. Rock and pull.

He said, "We're gonna hit!"

I said, "I've got it!" and I did, thanks to the power from the other engine. If he hadn't run the No. 1 back up, we probably would have landed hard and could have broken the aircraft. It turned out to be one of the best autos I have ever done, with zero forward airspeed, and a perfectly level and aligned helicopter at the bottom. Would that have been enough to prevent serious damage, injury or death? Perhaps, but I didn't want to find out, and I'm really glad that we didn't find out then. Even if we had, we would have come down on a pad where landing is prohibited (though hovering is not) because of possible damage to the pad's structure.

After the evaluator finished yelling at me, I explained that we had done this once before, and I had asked him about it afterwards. He remembered, and when I told him that I thought I had done the "wrong" thing in waving off last year (not wrong, just not what he wanted), he told me that I had misunderstood him. After a couple of professional expletives, we both laughed with relief and called it a day.

This misunderstanding could've cost us, and the Navy, a lot, and we had avoided a disaster with a bit of skillful flying on my part and quick reactions on his part. Hard to feel good about it, but I learned a lot that day.

If something happens that has made you cringe, even just a little, never accept anything but a complete and thorough explanation or description. Never allow it in your aircraft until you're completely satisfied with that answer. Even if it is a check flight, you have the right to say, "Hell, no, we're not going to do that!" If you are sure about something, but then are made to feel you know nothing, find out why.

And finally, don't forget operational risk management. All I had to do was bring this up in the NATOPS brief before the flight, and I'm sure it would have been resolved right then and there. 

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vertigo, since we were so low and still so far from the ship's stern.

We recovered quickly, discussed the incident briefly, and got back in the game. The darkness bred disorientation, and the HAC later repaid the favor when I had a healthy case of the leans. Well-established in the air boss's uncomfortable pattern, the HAC repeatedly pleaded for a "more efficient pattern." We asked to take care of one ship at a time to avoid all the problems I just outlined. I recall wanting to further comment about the position of the lone FA-18 parked so that it was almost impossible not to overfly. Every attempt to streamline the pattern was rejected. I thought we should be saying something other than "inefficient," but we didn't.

The night continued with near-misses with the other H-46 from the T-AFS. We pleaded to the tower for better "efficiency." With each pass, we questioned the operation more and more. I wanted to say something else, but I didn't. Meanwhile, the mini-boss kept refining his wishes.

"Sideflare, drop that load ... more right ... you have a fouled load ... retro to the left." This put the radio traffic at an intense level for daytime work, let alone a night like this. The noise added another degree of required "flexibility." Of course, the pilot at the controls, with radio mixer-switches down in order to hear our crewman's calls, was not privy to the tower's suggestions, so it all had to be back-briefed. I sat silently during one refueling, resenting that as an H2P, I had to study all those publications that set the requirements for night vertrep, which detail efficient and safe patterns, warn against excessive radio traffic, quantify the proper ship distances, and delineate discretion for night vertrep. I saw none of it put into practice that night.

We finished the operation that night as if "no" was not in our vocabulary. I was glad it was over. Throughout the mission, I wondered, "Before how many aviation mishaps did the crew feel uncomfortable just like this?" I wondered, yet I never said a thing. I spoke up during the debrief, but by then, it was easy.

In the story, the boy in the midst of crowds, royalty, and pressure had the courage to go against everything taught and say, "The emperor has no clothes." One of us in the aircraft that night should have said the publications are there for a reason. We should have overcome the fear of speaking up against the powers that be. We should have said something other than that this vertrep operation was "inefficient." 

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