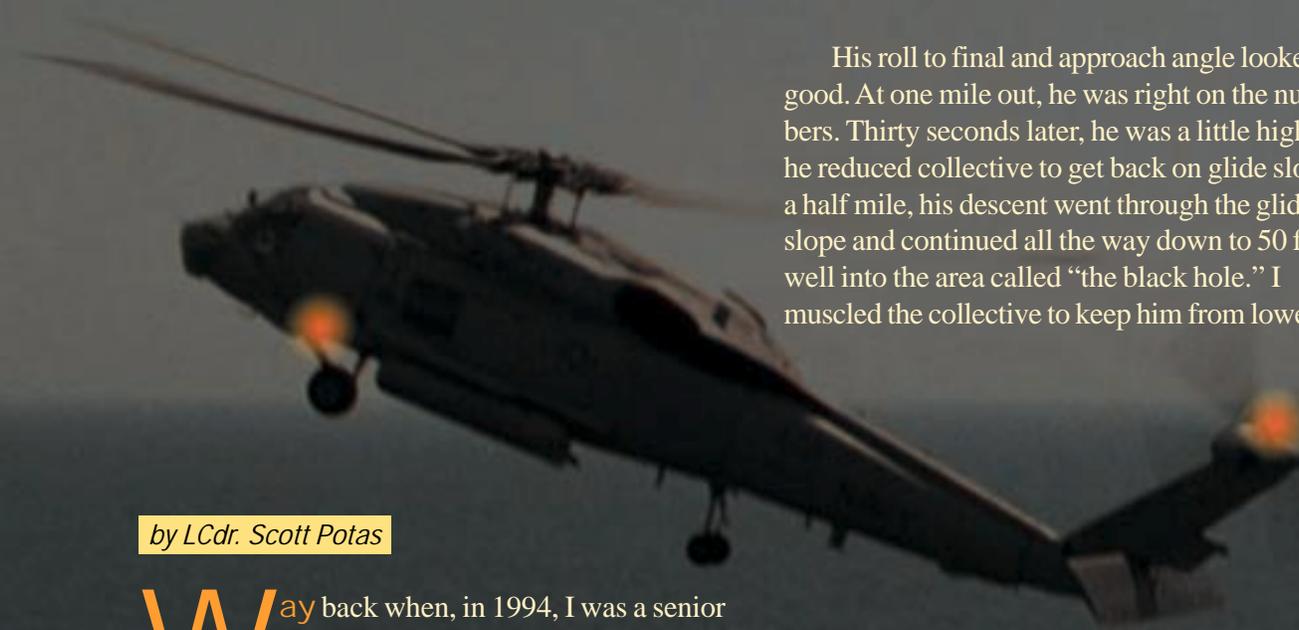


This Approach Is Going To Be Perfect



His roll to final and approach angle looked good. At one mile out, he was right on the numbers. Thirty seconds later, he was a little high, so he reduced collective to get back on glide slope. At a half mile, his descent went through the glide slope and continued all the way down to 50 feet, well into the area called “the black hole.” I muscled the collective to keep him from lowering it

by LCdr. Scott Potas

Way back when, in 1994, I was a senior lieutenant in my first squadron tour. I always seemed to be the HAC for deck-landing qualifications, which meant I had to deal with all the nuggets coming down from the RAG and all the lieutenant commanders returning to flight operations after three years out of the cockpit. As most of you know, these guys can scare you on a dark night near a large mass of metal and water.

One particular night stands out. The pilot I was requalifying was a lieutenant commander who had just finished a tour in D.C. and hadn't flown in the shipboard environment for a while. I lifted off from the ship, demonstrated the textbook, NATOPS ship approach and easily landed the aircraft. Because we had starboard relative winds, I did the next takeoff, turned downwind, and handed the controls to him. He confidently took them and proceeded.

farther and helped him pull in some power while I called for it. He recovered to the proper glide slope, and we landed.

His second approach was a carbon copy of the first, and so was the third. In each case, the only thing keeping us airborne was a power call and my firm grip on the collective, which prevented him from taking us for a swim. We recovered after the third approach, and he apologized to the aircrewman and me, saying, “I don't know what was wrong with me tonight!” The next pilot entered the aircraft and the DLQs continued. All I could think about was how screwed up that lieutenant commander was. I promised myself I would never get that low, that far behind the ship. My flying career would never find *me* putting the aircraft in the black hole.

Flash forward to 1999. I was a lieutenant commander on deployment in the Gulf during a super J.O. tour. I had plenty of hours and felt responsible for training my H2Ps to be at least as good if not better than me at landing on the ship. We were about two-thirds of the way through cruise, and I couldn't remember the last time I missed the trap.

I was flying with an H2P who was consistently high and fast coming into the ship. I was backing her up on her approach and noticed she was higher and faster than usual. I told her to bring it around again. This was the perfect time to show her the correct way to approach a small deck. I took the controls and started describing how she needed to do this and that to maintain glide slope on her approach to the ship.

This was also where my brain started to say, "Don't screw up this approach, be right on the numbers, right on the SGSI, amber-red interface all the way in!" I knew if I was going to say her approach was bad, I had to make damn sure mine was perfect.

I continued talking and training as I scanned the instruments and checked to make sure I had the SGSI perfectly in the amber-red zone. At one mile from the back of the ship, I had it nailed. At three-quarters of a mile, I was a little high and adjusted the collective to make the correction. At this point, my desire for perfection made me drop all my training and abandon my instrument scan. The SGSI was amber-red and it was going to stay that way. At that point, the world had stopped for me, and I tuned out everything except the SGSI.

My H2P and aircrewman pulled me back to reality with simultaneous screams: "Power! Power! Power!" I pulled up the collective like my

life depended upon it and gained altitude in a hurry. My copilot asked if I was OK and offered to take the controls. The guy who would never get too low behind the ship had just missed the water, a half-mile behind the ship, by 19 feet at 50 knots. If not for my copilot and aircrewman backing me up and paying close attention to our altitude, we all would have been swimming... or worse.

My H2P suggested I regain my confidence and land the aircraft. After reestablishing my instrument scan, I recovered the aircraft on the next approach. I spent the next three weeks apologizing to her and my crew for nearly crashing.

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What had happened? I had abandoned my instrument scan and focused on an external light source to give me all the information for my approach. I had made a small correction at three-quarters of a mile to put myself on glide slope and, because of my fixation, never took it out. I had let my overwhelming desire to perform the perfect approach overtake years of training and experience. I finally understood what had happened to that lieutenant commander in 1994. 

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