

Totally Tubular, Man

aka

Strength of an Idea

By Ltjg. Dan Leary, USCG

It started simply enough: an NVG trainer with a sister helo and a local 41-foot, motor-life boat (MLB). This would be a great hop. The other pilot and I were HH-65 aircraft commanders, and the flight mechanic was upgrading his qualifications. We also had a salty flight-mechanic instructor with 18 years of experience on board. The weather was severe clear, with unlimited visibility under the goggles.

We would bang out night boat hoists, while the other aircraft did night rescue-swimmer work, then swap. After shooting a couple of night approaches to the shoreline, we started the boat

work. The first two hoists went fine—underway hoists, direct to the well deck of the 41-footer.

As we began the third hoist, the basket hit the deck of the MLB, and the boat called for a waveoff. Since we were committed with the basket on deck, we waited for a ready-for-pickup signal, then hoisted the basket clear and backed off.

The MLB told us they saw something tubular fall from the helo. There isn't much room in the back of the Dolphin, so after a quick gear check, we concluded it must have been a chemlight. "Yeah, that's it, a chemlight," I said. Everyone

agreed. We completed the boat-hoist training and began rescue-swimmer work, while our sister ship hit the boat for some hoists.

The 30-minute flight to the air station was uneventful. We debriefed the flight with the aircrew and headed for the hangar. At that moment, I looked up and saw our tail-rotor-driveshaft cover was missing. This six-foot-long cover is indeed tubular. We called the boat station, and, fortunately, they recovered our missing cover.

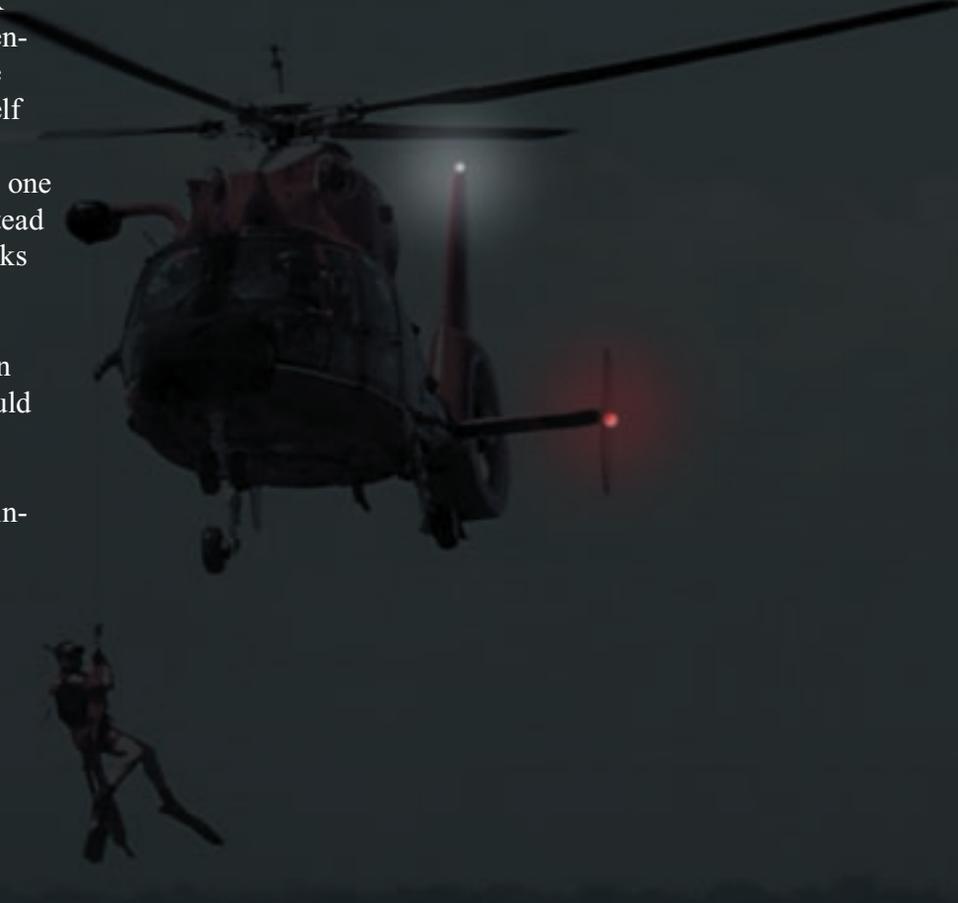
Post-flight inspection revealed it had failed in flight. The three fasteners showed signs of wear. Was it material failure? I'd like to think so. The helicopter just had come out of a seven-day-maintenance inspection. Did we miss the discrepancy on preflight? Three people, myself included, had preflighted the aircraft without noticing if the driveshaft cover was loose. No one had done a physical, hands-on check. We instead opted for the strength of an idea (e.g., if it looks secured, it must be).

It's not mentioned in NATOPS, but I now physically check all covers on preflight. When the MLB said something tubular fell, we should have had our sister ship, or the MLB, check us with a spotlight to verify if anything was missing or out of place. We were only two min-

utes from a local airport. We could have diverted and checked the aircraft before resuming training.

We were focused on trying to bang out mins up front and complete the flight mechanic's check ride. We should have slowed down and reanalyzed the mission. As the saying goes, it is better to be on the ground, wishing you were in the air, than in the air, wishing you were on the ground. 🛩️

Ltjg. Leary was an HH-65 aircraft commander with Coast Guard Air Station, Traverse City, Mich. He is currently stationed at Kodiak, AK.



At that moment, I looked up and saw our tail-rotor-driveshaft cover missing.