

The Night a Strobe Light Didn't Blink Right

Navy photo by PH1 Mark Therien



Aircrewmembers must make sure their personal-protection equipment always works. As this story points out, though, they also need to make sure the ship's life-saving equipment works as well.

Did the strobe batteries die? Worse yet, did the strobe light come untied from the life ring and sink? We knew the answers to these and many more questions would have to wait.

By AECS Frank Wilbanks,
HSL-48

It was dark, windy and cold when several Sailors from a ship's helo detachment gathered on the flight deck to discuss the events of another long day at sea. One of them had just said he sure wouldn't want to fall overboard on a night like this when the IMC blared, "MAN OVERBOARD! PORT SIDE —THIS IS NOT A DRILL!"

We first looked at one another in total disbelief, each wondering if he knew the unfortunate shipmate. Then, our lead aircrewman realized something wasn't right. No one had bothered to throw out a life ring, smoke float, or other device to mark the spot. Everyone was so busy trying to get to their muster stations that they had overlooked this important requirement.

The lead aircrewman grabbed a life ring on the flight deck and threw it as far as he could. When it hit the water, the strobe light activated. We all then ran to our muster stations. Before returning to the flight deck to start searching, we grabbed flashlights and float coats.

As the ship reversed course, we noticed the life ring strobe was no longer visible. Was our shipmate on the life ring holding on to the strobe?

After what seemed an eternity, someone said he thought he saw the strobe light flash. Everyone peered into the darkness off the ship's starboard side and did, in fact, see the strobe light. The only problem was it was flashing every 20 to 30 seconds, instead of the normal three to five seconds. The bridge watchstanders didn't know a life ring was in the water, and they were surprised when they saw the strobe light. Crewmen recovered the ring, and, after four more musters, it was determined all hands were aboard and accounted for.

This entire evolution began when a Sailor heard what he thought was a splash — therefore possibly a man overboard — and promptly notified the bridge. Even though it turned out to be a false alarm, the Sailor did the right thing. The next time he reports an unusual noise it could mean the difference between life and death for a shipmate.

We must always be alert to our surroundings while at sea — particularly at night — and we must be able to respond quickly to a man-overboard incident. We should also know how our man-overboard, life-saving equipment works, especially strobes on life rings and life vests. They are not just blinking lights, and at night become crucial "navigation aids" used to position the ship to recover a shipmate who has fallen over the side! 🙏