

A 3,000-Ton Fish Story

Luckily, this big one got away!

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“We all should have died on that mission, Stan. It was only God's Grace that saved us from catastrophe.”

“Well, Gary, sounds like your near-miss with death renewed your religious ethic. How about telling the story in printable fashion, so my readership can share in the excitement and lessons of your experience.”

(Hello, readers! This is Stan Muldoon, aviation safety journalist, banging out another of those thrilling tales told by fliers who want their message passed along, but would rather not take the credit—if you know what I mean. Today, I'm hearing one from an old friend of mine who had a little incident while trying to use his helicopter's rescue hoist to lift a 3,000-ton ship. Sound like a fun trip? Well, read on!)

“Now, from the beginning, Gary. Let's have all the details on the mission and your narrow escape from death's greedy clutches. And don't omit that interesting detail about the miswired switch that, ironically, saved your lives.”

“Stan, I was brand new to the unit. In fact, I was the only second lieutenant on base—an honor I would have preferred to let go unnoticed. Fresh out of helicopter school, I felt confident in my basic abilities as a helicopter pilot; particularly in performing tricky precision hover operations. However, being new to the Huey 'gunship model,' I was not yet completely familiar with the hoist/armament panel and associated 'red guarded' switches.

“The call came at an early hour on a Saturday morning. Though we weren't actually a Rescue unit, our squadron eagerly performed such missions whenever the opportunity arose. This was to be my very first! I donned my green bag and was busy lacing the flight boots as I simultaneously talked to ComPost and copied mission data. Nathan, our 10-month-old toddler, sensed the excitement. He escaped his mother's grasp during a diaper changing ritual and scrambled over to me, attentively grinning while he clung to my knee. As I hung up the phone,

I took a deep breath to slow the adrenalin. The warm sensation around my right foot seemed odd. One squishy step resolved that mystery. Nathan, naked as a jaybird, had surreptitiously irrigated the inside of my boot. Time was critical, so I only had time to hunt up a fresh change of socks. Maybe I should have considered it an omen.”

“Cute anecdote, Gary. But I'm not sure about the safety message in that digression. Let's go to the flying part.”

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“Right, Stan. Down at the flightline, the AC had rotors turning before I even finished my preflight walk around. He was a crusty old major with a reputation for being a bit hyper. Since he was the chief pilot, I looked forward to this opportunity to demonstrate my airmanship skills. He launched our machine towards the open sea just as I plugged into the intercom, and then began his staccato-paced briefing on the task before us. We were to locate a merchant vessel 75 miles off shore and assist three seamen suffering toxic fumes inhalation. The AC conducted his briefing monologue without interruption. He covered every minor parameter and contingency for his own part in the mission but left out the rest of the crew. Significantly, he also omitted any mention of emergency procedures.

“Chain smoking with furious determination, he lit his Luckies while delicately holding the cyclic (stick) between his knees. I was impressed by his dexterity, but fearful of the consequences, since he insisted on flying with the force trim 'off.' The hoist operator, a steady and experienced NCO, did mention

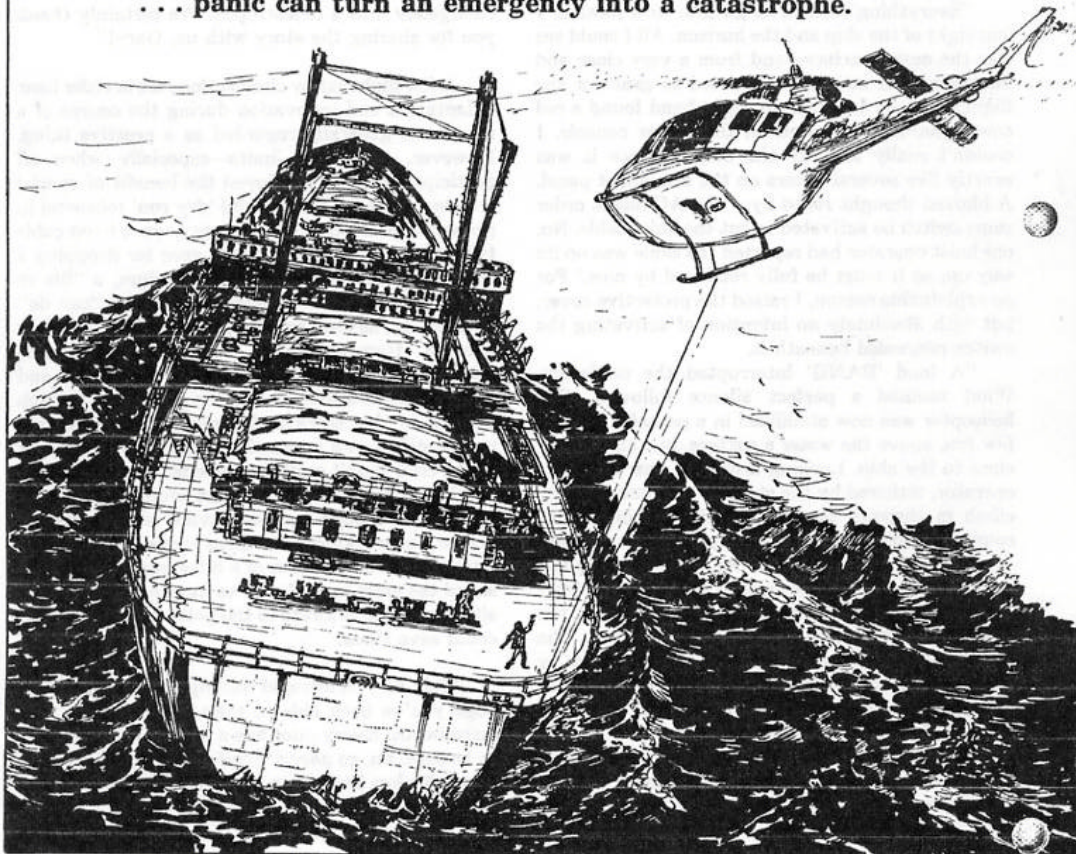
the fire hazard associated with internal fuel bladders, but his comment was disregarded. We also had a flight surgeon aboard who seemed totally awestruck by his first helicopter flight. The AC occasionally seemed to solicit an input from the crew, but was always quick to provide his own response. He even managed an isolated attempt at humor, mumbling something about how his singularly quick reflexes were the key to his prowess as a helicopter pilot.

"We spotted the ship after more than an hour of flight at VNE. Our crew's anxiety was at a peak. Since direct radio contact with the ship wasn't possible, we circled twice to coax it to slow down from full speed and, hopefully, head 30 degrees into the

wind. Finally, the ship stopped dead in the water, and didn't change course. Her bow pitched heavily on 8-ft swells. Our AC hovered our chopper over the ship's stern and ordered the litter basket lowered by the hoist in our right door. Though the AC couldn't see any part of the ship except the top of the mast visible through my door window, he ignored my offer to hold our 50-ft hover using the better references available to me in the left seat.

"Before the litter basket even reached the deck, our hoist operator advised that sailors on the deck were signaling for us to depart. We recovered the litter as the AC muttered, 'This *has* to be the right ship!' Still struggling to maintain a hover which was

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becoming less stable with every gust of wind, he ordered a hand-scrawled message be lowered on the hoist cable. A reply message was eventually retrieved and indicated assistance was no longer required. Determined our efforts not be wasted, the AC directed another message be lowered asking if we might send down our flight surgeon to examine the patients. As that message was being dispatched, the flight surgeon spoke on intercom for the first time and indicated some reservation about riding the hoist. Upon hearing this, the AC expressed considerable displeasure, but ordered the hoist cable retrieved just as it reached the ship's deck.

"Suddenly, our helicopter began a series of wrenching, rolling jerks. I heard the shrill whine of engines straining to turn rotor blades forced to bend at increasing pitch angles as the AC pulsed his collective lever. The violent motions threw me against my door. The AC shouted, 'Tail rotor failure! We're ditching!' He vainly wrestled the controls to achieve a level attitude prior to water impact.

"Everything seemed to go into slow motion. I lost sight of the ship and the horizon. All I could see was the ocean surface—and from a very close and uncomfortable attitude! I wanted to grab for the flight controls. Instead, my right hand found a red cover guarding a switch on the center console. I couldn't really identify the switch, since it was exactly like several others on the armament panel. A blurred thought raced by: 'The AC might order some switch be activated to cut the hoist cable. No, our hoist operator had reported the cable was on its way up, so it must be fully retrieved by now.' For no explainable reason, I raised the protective cover, but with absolutely no intention of activating the switch concealed beneath it.

"A loud 'BANG' interrupted the confusion. What seemed a perfect silence followed. Our helicopter was now stabilized in a peaceful hover a few feet above the water's surface, but also rather close to the ship. Looking around, I saw our hoist operator, tethered by the strap of his gunner's belt, climb in through the right cabin opening. After connecting his interphone, he explained the mystery of what had *really* happened: As the hoist cable was being raised, it became entangled and lashed securely to the ship's railing. The ship, descending into the trough of a swell, had pulled us down with it. The hoist operator was yanked out of the helicopter by the first violent jerks, and his interphone cord disconnected. He'd been unable to reach the cable-cut switch at his own station.

"During the long, quiet flight home, I glanced down at the red guarded switch on the center console. *It had been activated!* Closer inspection revealed a

thin strand of copper safety wire attached to the red cover and looped around the switch. Normally, that safety is only fastened to an anchor screw on the console to prevent inadvertent lifting of the cover. It had been miswired, so merely raising the cover had activated the switch and *guillotined the cable!*"

"So, Gary, you made no conscious decision to actually cut that cable when you did?"

"No way! Not with *that* AC. Unless he gave the command to do it first, I wouldn't have considered it. In retrospect, I thank God the cover *was* attached directly to the switch!"

"By the way, when things appeared to slow down for you, that was probably a phenomenon we call 'temporal distortion.' It enabled you to evaluate the situation and react carefully during the emergency—perhaps only on instinct. Sometimes, however, it can have the opposite effect, and panic can turn an emergency into a catastrophe. We certainly thank you for sharing the story with us, Gary!"

A few flight safety observations are in order here: Adaptation and innovation during the course of a mission is generally regarded as a positive thing. However, there are limits—especially when all participants haven't enjoyed the benefit of special training or, at least, a careful 'dry run' rehearsal in preparation. Dropping messages down a hoist cable falls into that category. Same goes for dropping a flight surgeon onto a ship's deck. Sure, a "life or death" rescue mission generates a lot of "can do" enthusiasm; as does any high priority/high visibility mission. However, when too many procedures become "nonstandard," it's time to back off and reevaluate the situation and the priorities. Though the AC in this story had a plan, his overbearing nature stifled crew interaction and initiative. The rest of the crew didn't really know what to expect next, or what to do if everything went wrong. Emergency procedures *always* warrant review and discussion before undertaking hazardous maneuvers. Divine intervention in the form of a miswired safety cover saved the crew here. Better to have not allowed the situation to deteriorate to the point where only God *could* save them!

Well, all you intrepid darlings of the airways—hope you've been able to take a lesson from this installment. Every pilot has a good tale of his own, to be sure. So, *go ahead. Send it in!* Until next time then, this has been Stan Muldoon *wishing you safe skies and mission success!* ✈