

## Holy Helos!

It began as a "fun day" working off-shore with a special ops team stationed at the nearby amphibious base. The CH-46 *Sea Knight* crew flew a few passes of "limp duck," got everyone qualified in "fastrope," and carried the crew around the field a couple of times on the SPIE (Special Insertion Extraction) rig. All hands were satisfied with the day's evolution and as the special ops personnel secured, the helo departed the field for the hotpit back at home base.

While in the hotpit, the helo was summoned for another mission because the other helo experienced maintenance problems. The *Sea Knight* was thus assigned to fly over-water paradrops involving the same group which they had worked with earlier.

NOTAMS (notice to airmen) had been issued to secure the DZ (drop zone). Because of a delay caused by the civilian tower which controlled the area, the CH-46 arrived at the base with only an hour of fuel onboard. The crew wasn't overly concerned because the overwater DZ was only five minutes away. The jumpmaster gave a thorough brief and the jumpers loaded



onto the *Sea Knight*.

With 40 minutes of fuel onboard, the helo took off and proceeded to the DZ.

The jumpers were to leap out at 1,500 feet after several passes over the recovery boats to drop streamers and check the winds. On the first pass, an H-53 *Sea Stallion* flew directly beneath the CH-46. On the second pass, the crew successfully dropped wind streamers. The third pass was uneventful and the jumpers were given the one-minute warning.

The pilot turned onto a final approach course and lowered the ramp. All was in order: winds were good, jumpers were standing by, and the recovery boats were on station. The countdown was under way. Five, four, three, two...

Suddenly, the pilot ordered, "Abort the jump! Abort!"

He had sighted an H-2 *Seasprite* directly below the *Sea Knight*. The CH-46 pilot began the turn for yet another pass but the H-2, unintentionally, turned with the *Sea Knight*, matching the track of the CH-46 for two more passes.

Recognizing his low fuel status, the *Sea Knight* pilot binged for more fuel. After a quick refueling, the aircraft returned to the DZ but the recovery boats had secured for the day. The mission was scrubbed.

*Gramps thanks HC-6's Lt. Grady Banister for this submission.*



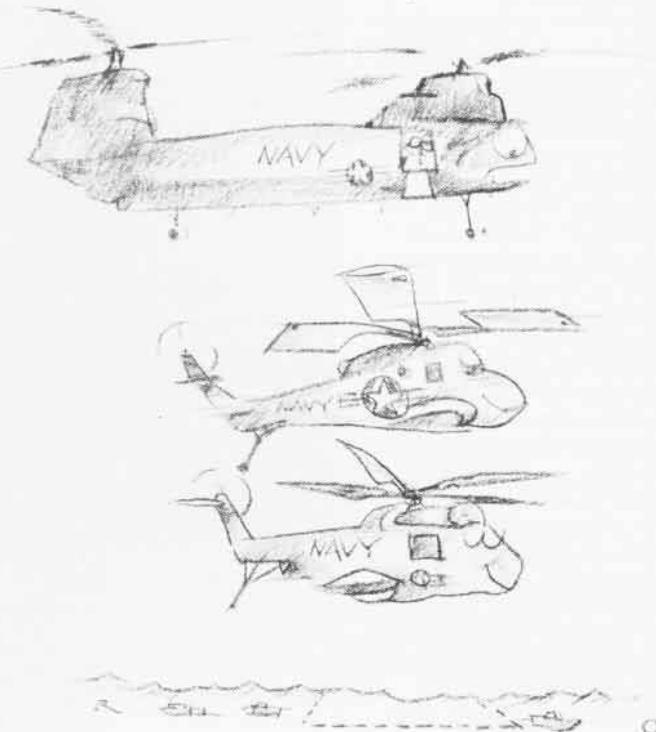
**Grampaw Pettibone says:**

**NOTAMS will never make the best seller list. But they could be the most important thing a Naval Aviator ever reads – after NATOPS (Naval Air Training and Operating Procedures Standardization).**

The *Sea Knight* pilot believed that neither the *Sea Stallion* nor the *Seasprite* – who surely didn't read the NOTAMS – flew under his aircraft on purpose. They likely didn't even know the CH-46 was above them.

The mere thought of a parachutist descending helplessly into the rotor blades of a helicopter – a catastrophe for both the individual and the helo – is indeed horrifying.

**Lesson: Read and heed those NOTAMS!**



## Formation Folly

A pair of FA-18C *Hornets* were on a simulated air-to-ground ordnance delivery mission designed to practice utilization of the AN/ASQ-173 strike camera. Established in the overwater working area, the wingman – or “camera” aircraft – set his barometric autopilot hold function for 23,200 feet and advised lead that he was ready to take pictures. Maintaining 22,900 feet, lead maneuvered aft of, and under, the wingman and while maneuvering, directed the wingman to start and stop the picture sequence. Lead held a constant altitude throughout this pass and cleared to the left front of the wingman.

The wingman transmitted, “Let’s try again, a little closer.” Lead moved aft, maintaining 22,900 feet. The wingman radioed that he was setting his barometric hold function for 23,150 feet for this second pass. This transmission was not acknowledged by lead.

Lead then assumed position aft and below the camera aircraft, with step-down of 20 feet, and directed the picture sequence to begin. Lead’s centerline was aligned with the left engine of the wingman. Lead maneuvered so that he was looking aft over his right shoulder at the second plane and judged that the wingman’s radome was close to his (lead’s) right vertical tail. (The wingman last saw lead when he moved aft to execute the second run.)

Next, lead tried to clear away from the camera plane. The *Hornets* collided. In short order, the wingman heard an auditory tone, the master caution light came on, and his FA-18’s velocity vector dropped off. He felt the nose falling and applied left stick but got no response. There was a loud noise, a rush of air, and buffet. Lead experienced airframe buffet similar to jet wash as he moved from under the camera aircraft.

Lead maneuvered to join on the descending wingman who recovered his *Hornet* at 9,000 feet. The wingman’s canopy, radome, and radar antenna were gone, along with the pilot’s helmet and oxygen mask. He was being sprayed by a sticky fluid emanating from above and below the instrument panel. He headed for home base. He was unable to read instruments except



in short bursts after wiping the glass clear of fluid.

Other caution lights illuminated and subsequently the left engine failed. The wingman motioned lead to stay clear and a moment later, the airfield in sight, the wingman’s *Hornet* began to fishtail. He tried emergency gear extension after the normal system failed to function. At actuation, the pilot was blasted by air and hydraulic fluid from the cockpit floor area.

Uncontrollable, the *Hornet* was now at 180 knots and 800 feet. With the left wing down 30 degrees and the ocean below him, the wingman ejected. The station search and rescue helo was on the scene quickly and recovered the pilot, who was injured but survived. Lead landed uneventfully.



**Grampaw Pettibone says:**

**Gol dang it! These fellas – both seasoned flight leaders – shoulda gone back to basics. Basic airwork, that is. A seemingly simple formation hop turned into a midair nightmare.**

**They briefed the flight alright, but investigators said they left out “conduct of the air-to-air picture-taking sequence, the number of sequences planned, variations in aircraft separation, geographic location of maneuvers, directive commentary during maneuvers, formation lead changes, responsibility to maintain center assigned altitudes, and closest point of approach in formation.”**

**Lead put himself in a tough spot for the picture taking. He didn’t have familiar cues to help orient his position, maneuvering as he did. He misjudged his distance from number two and the *Hornets* smacked into each other.**

**One endorser of the mishap report wrote, “Two experienced aviators ran into each other while flying the simplest formation flight.”**

**An insufficient briefing and questionable basic air work turned “simple” into “complex” and cost the inventory one fighter bomber.**