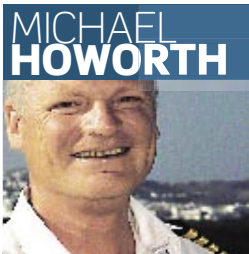


Facing the dangers of casual flying

WITH MORE YACHTS USING HELIPADS IT'S INCREASINGLY URGENT THAT CREW ARE PROPERLY TRAINED TO COPE WITH EMERGENCIES

MICHAEL HOWORTH REPORTS



**MICHAEL
HOWORTH**

Highly experienced, captain Michael Howorth has commanded a number of significant superyachts and written extensively on the subject

It always amazes me when I witness the poor regard for life some people in the superyacht industry have when the use of the helicopter at sea is involved.

Certainly, yacht crews know all the rules and regulations that state what is, and is not, acceptable when landing the aircraft. But this often goes straight out the window once the boss phones and says: "Get the boat to Sardinia, anchor in Calle di Volpe, and I'll join you by helicopter."

All the crew now have to deal with the helicopter's arrival and rush around with renewed vigour because the boss is on his way.

And the captain reminds all the crew — again — how important it is to keep the landing area surgically clean, pointing out — once more — foreign-object damage can wreck a helicopter's gas turbine engine if it ingests so much as a single baseball cap or cushion carelessly left out.

Urgency above safety

The crew are left with no doubt that if they do not comply properly with the rules the helicopter will

clear of the area before the aircraft comes in.

What is wrong with these people?

We should be asking why it is that individuals directly involved in the day-to-day operation of the infernal flying machine — captains, engineers, crew, helicopter-landing officers, fire-fighters — are not forced to complete a specific and comprehensive training course to absolutely ensure that they can correctly load, test and supply aviation fuel and lubricants — and then safely launch and land the bird?

It is imperative that all personnel understand that operating a helicopter affects everyone onboard — in particular the captain who must fully understand his or her role and the responsibilities they have during helicopter operations — including communications, meteorology, wind speed and direction, air flow, wave heights and frequency, and visibility.

Awareness of danger

Because the magnitude of the wind speed over a ship's deck — coupled with the varying rotor speed during the engage and disengage parts of a sortie — exposes the rotors to dangerous blade deflections there is a clear and precedented danger, which can result in serious damage to the aircraft — and even fatality.

Therefore, before altering course or speed, the captain needs to have acute awareness of everything that is happening both fore and aft.

And crew are not the only people who need to be made more aware of the dangers of helicopter activity.

Designers will simply draw a helicopter on a plan and — before you know it — the flight deck has been written into the specification despite the fact that the yacht may not be big enough to cope with the size of helicopters which will eventually be visiting it.

Indeed, I know of one yacht which has a mast that moves forward hydraulically to give the incoming pilot a few extra inches in which to dodge the exhaust uptakes and then land on what is euphemistically called a 'touch and go' pad.

Little wonder the MCA has updated the Large Yacht Code and appointed the Helideck Certification Agency (HCA) to inspect and verify landing conditions and operations aboard yachts.

Lets hope it works and that life — and money — can be protected from such lax and untrained practice. ●

“I have even seen crew lie on top of cushions to stop them blowing away rather than remove them clear of the area before the aircraft lands”

immediately plummet from the sky and crash into the deck with terrifying consequences...

But then someone mentions that the boss is flying in with his latest girlfriend — and then the stewardess remembers how much the girlfriend is especially fond of pink flowers and then rushes off to make a suitable arrangement for the table that is being prepared up on the sundeck!

In my time, I have even seen the mandatory fire-fighting crew turn up, as the helicopter closes in, dressed in nothing more than shorts and smartly pressed crew shirt with an extinguisher to hand.

And I have even seen crew lie on top of cushions to stop them blowing away — rather than remove them