A NO-SWEAT SORTIE?

THERE'S NO SUCH THING!

by Terry Wilkinson
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HOW many times have we sat and listened to the same old emergency brief and subconsciously switched off because we've heard it all before? Well, no matter how experienced we are, or how well we may think we know our procedures, we can be fairly sure that when the time comes to put all we have been taught into practice, things are unlikely to happen the way we expected them to and our reactions won't necessarily be 'by the book'.

January 1978 and I was fresh off SAR Divers course and keen to do as much flying as possible any time day or night and in anything. Now, 22 January was a pleasant Sunday and HS 817 had been tasked to conduct an Inflatable Life raft Demonstration (ILR) for HMAS MELBOURNE at anchor in Jervis Bay. Our brief was simple – take one Wessex 31B fitted out as a SAR aircraft and conduct the ILR quickly and safely, and then return to NAS Nowra for what remained of our weekend off.

Clear skies and warm weather made it a beautiful day for flying so the aircrewman (LSA Peter Cummings) and I donned our dispatcher harnesses and sat in the doorway of Wessex N7-212 (822) for the transit to Jervis Bay. Shortly after take-off the pilot (LEUT David Anderson) established communications with the carrier and was advised that there would be a 15-20 minute delay due to the slow progress of that awful ritual at sea – Ship's Company Divisions.

Let's go swimming!

Now, ask yourself what you would do with 20 minutes spare flying time around Jervis Bay on a warm Sunday morning and you would probably come up with the same answer we did – check out the beaches! What we saw as we passed over the southern end of Bowen Island was beautiful to say the least and it was quickly decided that another slow pass would be in order. The aircrewman and myself were still sitting in the doorway, but now leaning out for a better look as we approached the beach. Then quite suddenly, approximately 150 metres from the beach with the aircraft at 70 ft or so and about 10 kts groundspeed, the engine failed!

LEUT Anderson managed only one MAYDAY before the aircraft hit the water. I remember bringing my feet inside the aircraft and looking out the doorway and seeing nothing but a wall of water entering the rear compartment at a great rush. At that instant I recall telling myself not to panic but it was too late – I was unstrapped and out of the aircraft to supposed safety before I could gather my thoughts. After leaving the aircraft and entering the water, I immediately sank due to the weight of the survival equipment I was wearing. However, instinct and survival training procedures eventually took over and I inflated my Mae West and surfaced.

With the initial problem of drowning out of the way I started to breathe a little easier – but not for long. As I looked up I was confronted with another problem – the still-spinning tail rotor was bearing down on me with a rush. All I could do at this stage was put my feet out in front of myself and fend off the aircraft's tail section until the pilot had applied enough rotor brake pressure to stop the rotors. The whole event happened in only seconds, but it seemed like an eternity and I found myself exhausted after very little effort.

I eventually inflated my single-man life raft and clambered aboard. I paddled my way around to the cabin doorway of the aircraft and found the pilot and aircrewman boarding their life rafts as well. Peter was soaked from head to toe due to the amount of water that had entered the aircraft's cabin area on impact. However, because of the pilot's position in the Wessex, he was dry as a bone and gleefully pointed this fact out to us! Once we had assured each other that we were okay, we set off for the beach, just 100 metres metres away.

On nearing the beach, Peter and I were discussing what had happened when we heard a muffled cry for help. Looking back to see if the pilot was okay, we could see that his life raft had deflated and he was holding it in his hand like a wet piece of rag. (This brought a smile to our faces after his dig at us earlier about us being wet.) As we started towards him to lend a hand, a boat from HMAS MELBOURNE arrived and picked him up. The boat coxswain yelled at us to get to the beach and wait as there were two more boats arriving shortly to pick us up.

Hey fella's, what about us!

To this day I don't know why we weren't also taken in the first boat, but at the time I thought nothing of it as we could see the other boats approaching the area. On reaching dry land Peter and I mustered our equipment and waited for our rescuers. Other boats arrived and immediately began securing tow lines and extra flotation bags to the aircraft, which by this time was bobbing gently in the swell. After yelling out for help for some five minutes, we managed to catch the attention of one

coxswain who merely waved and continued about his business. I can only assume that he thought the first boat had picked up all the crew and that we were just a couple of weird people standing on a beach on a hot summer's day in green overalls, or that recovery of the aircraft was priority one. It was quite a depressing experience: waiting to be rescued and watching our aircraft being towed out of sight by a salvage party. Another thirty minutes passed before we were eventually picked up by a civilian diving boat whose crew's attention we managed to attract.

Lessons learnt

I (and no doubt the other members of Wessex 822) learnt a lot of lessons in a hurry that day:

1. When you brief emergency procedures for the crew – and in particular for passengers – telling someone not to panic is well and good, but do not expect them or yourself *not to* panic in an emergency.

2. Seat harnesses are put into aircraft for a good reason. If you have no operational need to be in a dispatcher harness, then ***strap in.***

3. As much as survival equipment personnel do their utmost to ensure the equipment is serviceable, do not assume it will operate successfully on demand. Think of alternatives should this situation arise.

4. Before flight, run through in your mind your actions in any possible emergency.

5. If you have the bad luck of ditching or crashing and then think you have been spotted by rescuers, don't assume you will be recovered immediately. Use your survival aids wisely.

6. If we had been carrying passengers that day, I do not know if my actions would have been any different. It is important to remember that, as a crew, we have a responsibility for their safety. If we panic during an emergency, imagine how they must feel.

7. Lastly, stick to the published emergency procedures, they have been designed to maximise survival and save lives.

SONAS comment

Wessex 822 fortuitously ditched a mere 100 metres from the beach at the south head of Bowen Island in Jervis Bay. It was thus a relatively simple matter (after the initial confusion and panic had subsided) to get to dry land. The aircraft remained erect in the water, thanks to the in-built flotation bags and auxiliary bags provided from HMAS MELBOURNE. The aircraft was subsequently towed to the nearby Murray's Beach and recovered to dry land. Unfortunately, the degree of damage and salt water ingress dictated that it be 'written off'. Not all RAN helicopter ditchings have been so 'convenient'.

Although most RAN helicopters are now multi-engined, the increasing operations from of air-capable ship platforms means that, statistically, the risk of a ditching at sea is increased. With this in mind, any training crews can undertake eg, HUET – or any other scenario training activity – will be valuable preparation. As Terry Wilkinson pointed out in his experience with Wessex 822, things rarely happen the way you might imagine they will. Being thoroughly trained and prepared to expect the unexpected, might one day just save your life and other crewmembers and passengers.

As regards *'Where are they now?'*, Dave Anderson is a Flying Operations Inspector with CASA, Adelaide; Terry Wilkinson is the senior aircrewman with LLoyd Helicopter Group at their RAAF East Sale base; and Peter Cummings is an aircrewman with Westpac Rescue Helicopter, Hunter Region. ☺

A SAD END

Pictured is the outcome of what started out as a pleasant father/son day at sea.

As the USN Seahawk departed the ship, a request was made for it to carry out a flypast for the benefit of sons.

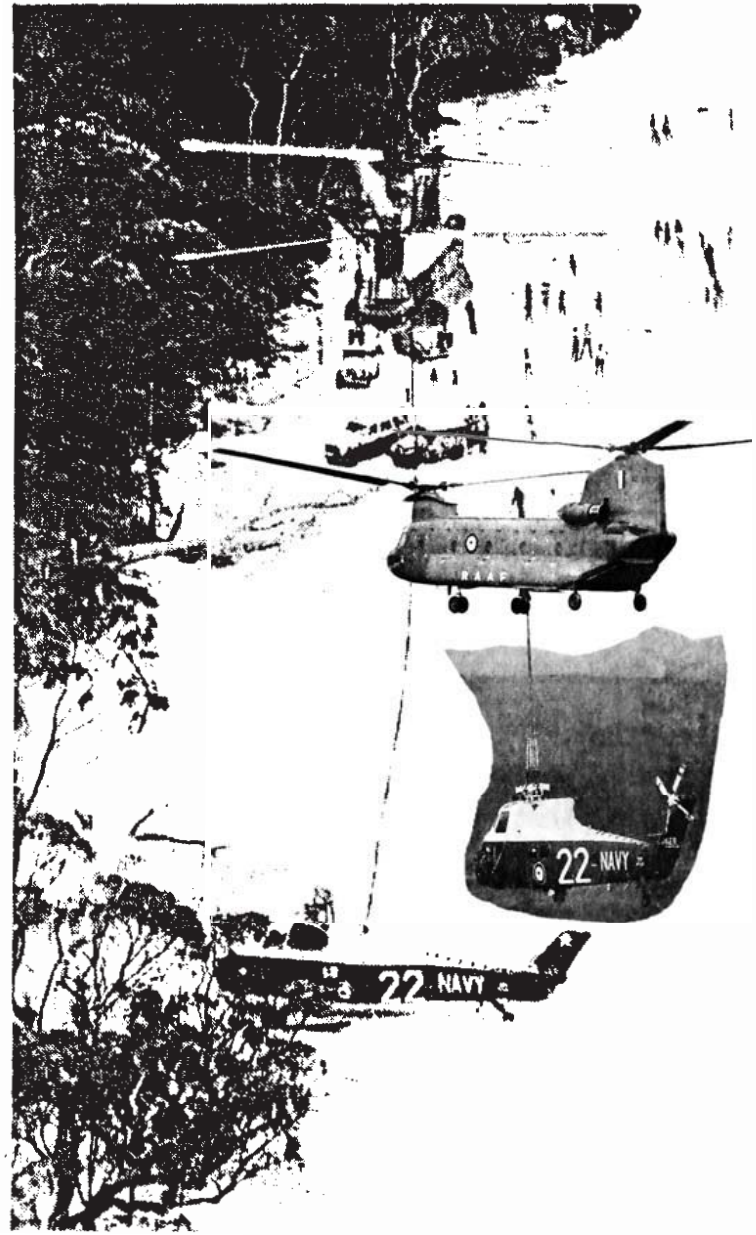
The helo carried out a high-speed pass followed by a steep climbing reversal turn. However, the pilot failed to arrest the aircraft's high rate of descent and it impacted the water.

Result: Two crewmembers dead, one survivor.

Moral:

Avoid unplanned, unbriefed manoeuvres.

WESSEX CREW ESCAPED INJURY



Three crew members of a Navy Wessex helicopter escaped injury when the helicopter ditched into the sea off Bowen Island, at the entrance to Jervis Bay, on January 22.

The crew comprised Lieutenant David Anderson, Leading Seaman Peter Cummings and SAR Diver, Leading Seaman Terry Wilkinson.

The RAAF later provided a Chinook helicopter to airlift the Wessex (pictured left) from Murrays Beach, just inside Jervis Bay, to Nowra.

The Wessex from 817 Squadron at the Naval Air Station, **HMAS ALBATROSS**, at Nowra was taking part in exercises with the aircraft carrier **HMAS MELBOURNE** and other fleet units.

About 10.30 am the helicopter was seen by the aircraft carrier to ditch in the water a short distance from Bowen Island.

The aircraft's flotation equipment was immediately activated and rescue boats were despatched by **HMAS MELBOURNE.**

Two of the helicopter crew swam ashore at Bowen Island while the third crew member remained with the floating helicopter until the rescue boats with divers arrived.

Lines were attached to the helicopter which was then towed to Murrays Beach.

The three crew members of the Wessex were taken to **HMAS MELBOURNE** and after examination by the ship's medical staff were flown back to Nowra.

An investigation has begun into the cause of the ditching.