

LETTER from CDRE John Da Costa (rtd) about Sea Venom Ejection Slipstream February 2002

<https://www.faaaa.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Slipstream-Vol-13-1-Feb02.pdf>

Dear Ed

The letter to the Editor by Ron Smith (Slipstream Vol. 12, No. 4 dated November 2001) regarding the loss of Sea Venom 866 (WZ 900) has stirred me, as pilot of the aircraft and OIC of 816 Squadron B Flight, into writing to you with my comments and some clarifying details regarding the accident.

It was very nice of Ron to promote me to LTCDR as at 28 April 1966, the date of the accident. I always considered him to be more appreciative of my value than my seniors in Navy Personnel, but I have to say that I was still a Lieutenant at the time!

A further indication of his perceptiveness is his assessment of my deck-landing skills - a bit of an exaggeration, perhaps, but what I would like to think was a fundamentally sound observation! Thank you, Ron.

I am sorry to hear that 'Shorty' Neilson has not been well. I have a great respect for him and all others of that professional band of maintainers in B Flight and I, for one, never had a moment of doubt during my period 'in command' of the Flight that the maintenance performed on those ageing aircraft was of the highest possible standard. It almost goes without saying that the WZ 900 Board of Inquiry found no evidence whatsoever to implicate aircraft maintenance as a cause of the accident.

As an aside, I am aware that a significant number of HMAS MELBOURNE or Squadron personnel have approached the Department of Veterans' Affairs regarding stress-related psychiatric conditions which they feel have resulted from having witnessed the accident. Without making any judgement on those claims, I unreservedly apologise for any distress which I may have inadvertently caused to any witnesses to the deck-landing accident and ditching. It must be that I was too busy at the time to

have been psychiatrically damaged myself while experiencing the actual traumatic event, because I seem to have escaped with only disabilities to my ankle and back (although I had plenty of time in the Sick-Bay in subsequent weeks to reflect upon it all!)

Turning to the accident then, I have the advantage of some contemporary documents and my own, perhaps somewhat time-affected 25-year memories, to draw on to set out what I believe to be an accurate description of events.

The touch-down on MELBOURNE's deck seemed normal enough, as was the first part of the arrest. However, things rapidly deteriorated. The deceleration suddenly ceased whilst the aircraft was still moving quite quickly (probably 20 knots or so below flying speed). The problem was not that the arrestor wire had broken (as suggested by Ron), but that one of the circlips holding the two halves of the port-side arrestor gear 'knuckle' together (the joint between the permanent arrestor gear wire connected to the hydraulic ram below-decks and the thicker, replaceable, cross-deck wire) had been dislodged when the knuckle struck the deck during the initial wire pull-out. This allowed the cross-deck arrestor wire to detach on the port side and whip through the arrestor hook, apparently removing a part of the aircraft fuselage as it went (probably from the 'beak' arrestor-hook housing). [The subsequent arrestor gear 'fix' was to redesign the knuckle to accommodate a spiral circlip].

Of course I had no idea what was going on behind me; all that I knew was that the aircraft was no longer decelerating and that there was insufficient deck remaining to stop by use of brakes, so I instinctively hit the throttle wide open.

It didn't take a brain surgeon to appreciate almost immediately thereafter that we were not going to achieve a successful 'bolter',

so I gave the order to eject, even though our altitude and speed were below the ejection parameters for that model of Martin Baker seat. My observer, Ted Kennell, obviously reacted to that order because photographs show that he (certainly not me) jettisoned the aircraft canopy just as the aircraft left the deck. The Sea Venom canopy had to be jettisoned, usually by the observer, before either ejection seat could be activated. I was convinced at the time that during the very short time that it took for the aircraft to hit the sea, I had heard another loud noise which I believed to be the sound of Ted's ejection seat firing. As the aircraft struck the water, I ejected. After a violent tumbling ride, I entered the water, very hard, and more by training instinct than anything, inflated my Mae West and separated myself from the parachute harness.

The airborne Planeguard (SAR) helicopter crew reportedly saw two ejection sets leave the aircraft, one (mine) going relatively higher than the other. They also reported that as they rapidly came to the ditching site, they saw a person, attached to a deployed parachute canopy, lying motionless and face-down in the water in the vicinity of the area where the aircraft had come to rest and sunk. They then saw this person begin to sink, but in the few seconds that it took for the SAR winch operator aircrewman to jump into the water to attempt a rescue, he had disappeared. Ted's body was never recovered.

Meanwhile, bobbing around in my Mae West, I was concerned to notice some blood on the Mae West bladders in front of my face. I put my hand to my mouth and found fresh blood on my glove. Oh, no, internal injuries! Later, I was found to have some minor cuts on my face which had been caused by the metal parts of my oxygen mask when I heavily struck the water (which had bled profusely, of course, to the extent that I recall the SAR crew averting their eyes when they first pulled me into the helicopter!).

My next trauma was when the SAR came to the hover overhead to winch me up. The downwash inflated my parachute canopy which began to drag me, semi-submerged, away from the helicopter. Apparently I was still entangled with a parachute shroud line which, fortunately, I was able to lift over my head and come to the 'Ho' again, as did the SAR chopper. Once I was in the rescue strop, I released my dinghy pack, and was winched up. It was during this lift, and when I was being pulled into the helicopter, that I felt a severe back pain. Oh, no, a broken back!

This pain went away after 24 hours on my back in the sick bay, but returned with a vengeance some 10 years or so later when the damaged disc led to a lumbar laminectomy and disc excision. But at least it was not a broken back! On stepping out of the helicopter on MELBOURNE's flight deck, my left ankle collapsed under me. I was unable, on this occasion, to self-diagnose the problem, but it was found by the SMO to be a broken talus bone in the foot, probably caused by the impact of the rudder bar as the aircraft struck the water. An ex-RAF Government Medical Officer who examined me later, referred to it as a 'classic rudder-bar fracture', of which he had treated many during WWII following Typhoon or Tempest fighter aircraft wheels-up landings.

A point of contention in this matter was whether or not Ted Kennell had attempted to eject. I had told the Board of Enquiry of discussions which Ted and I had had as to the relative merits of ejecting or riding it out into the water should we have had a brake failure on deck. Despite the unlikelihood of the parachute fully deploying under such low-speed, low-altitude circumstances, I was convinced that ejection was the best bet. Ted, a big man, was inclined toward riding it out, but had made no definitive statement as to what he would do. (We had not discussed [or envisaged] the circumstances of our actual accident.)

The Board of Enquiry took that evidence into account in concluding, despite my statement that I believed that Ted had ejected, and the eyewitness reports of the SAR crew, that he had not attempted to eject and that that was the explanation for him not having survived the accident. However, after reviewing all of the evidence, including a now missing cine-film of the accident, taken from the flight deck, and taking into account some Defence scientific calculations, Navy Office subsequently disagreed with that conclusion. Unfortunately, the Navy Office file on the matter cannot now be found, but I have it on the authority of the DNAP staff officer at the time, that the following conclusions were reached:

- Ted Kennell was believed to have ejected as the aircraft was descending rapidly from flight deck level. Because of the aircraft's downward velocity, and taking into account his weight, the resultant vertical velocity due to the thrust from the ejection seat had been reduced to the extent that insufficient height would have been gained to achieve full seat separation or parachute deployment.

- My seat was believed to have fired as the aircraft struck the water and downward velocity had ceased. Accordingly, the trajectory gained from the ejection seat thrust would have been sufficient for full seat separation to occur and the parachute would have filled more or less as I struck the water ahead of the initial ditching point.

A tragic accident which is still painful in more than one way, but I am grateful to still be here to talk about it.

Regards to all who knew Ted.

John Da Costa <https://www.faaaa.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Slipstream-Vol-13-1-Feb02.pdf>