



Some time ago the Editor of SLIPSTREAM asked me to write the story of the first night ejection from an aircraft in Australia. That incident occurred on the 15th June 1960 at RAN Air Station Nowra, NSW when a Sea Venom FAW 53 of 724 Squadron struck a tree on the downwind leg of the landing pattern. The Pilot and Observer ejected safely.

As this happened over 41 years ago, I obtained a copy of the Board of Inquiry report to refresh my memory. I wrote to Navy Office, but as the documents were over 30 years old they had sent them to the Australian Archives. I obtained a copy from them.

During this era Naval pilots gained their wings with the RAAF and completed OFS at NAS NOWRA in either fighter or anti submarine specialisation. 724 Squadron was equipped with Sea Venom and Vampire aircraft to carry out night fighter pilot training.

The Sea Venom FAW 53 (FAW - Fighter All Weather) was a side by side two-seater aircraft built by De Havilland in the United Kingdom and shipped to Australia in HMAS MELBOURNE in 1956. The aircraft was fitted with a Ghost 104 engine and radar that enabled the Observer to locate a target passing in the front sector of his aircraft. The Observers job was to verbally guide the pilot into a position where the pilot could see the target under all weather conditions, day and night. Although, when all went well, the radar was magic in its day, I understand that it is pretty basic compared to todies equipment whereby pilots pop off a missile at a blip. We only had 20mm cannon thus the pilot had to actually see the target before shooting. The Sea Venom was a good aircraft.

The characters in the story are mostly confined to Sub Lieutenant Brian A. Dutch and Lieutenant E.D. (Sandy) Sandberg because some of the other players are no longer with us. I would like to begin by thanking all the old 724 Squadron ground crew, the NAS Nowra Air traffic Control staff and particularly all the Armourers and Safety Equipment Branch sailors, without whose skills, this tale would not be told by me.

Flying on the evening of 15th June 1960 began with a twilight takeoff for Air Interception (AI) instruction. It was the 20th time I had flown with Brian, so we were pretty well used to one another. I had a lot of confidence in him and to my way of thinking in those days, he was the better pilot on this particular training course. As the Senior Observer of the squadron, I had the choice of pilots on a course and checked all their logbooks before selecting him. He was three years my junior in age; he had been flying for about 18 months and I for just on nine years. I have flown with a lot of pilots, in a lot of aircraft and I still rate Brian as a good pilot.

This particular AI course was programmed to finish that night, so there was pressure on us to get the appropriate number of exercises in – I don't recall how many, but something like three or four night interceptions would satisfy the syllabus. In fact we flew three sorties that night to get the required runs in.

A Naval Board of Inquiry was convened to determine the cause of the accident and several people on duty that night gave

their version of the event to the Board but it was the pilot who naturally underwent the most questioning and his version is the best account of what actually happened. He informed the Board that on returning from the first detail of the night the conditions in the circuit were slightly turbulent but didn't worry him at all. The detail as a whole was successful and the landing uneventful. After refueling we took off for the second detail in the same aircraft. But because the radar was unserviceable this time we returned to change aircraft. We experienced very severe wind gusts in the circuit area this time. On one occasion the weather sent us down 200 feet and then up 400 feet in a very short time. It was not a very nice night.

Within half an hour we had changed aircraft and were airborne again. Shortly after take off Brian had trouble with his oxygen equipment. We stayed low until he sorted out the problem. Fortunately this was not long and we were soon chasing our target (a Vampire flown by Lieutenant Roley Waddell-Wood) all over the sky for a successful mission. Now it was time to return to base and have a couple of beers to celebrate the completion of yet another night fighter course.

Below 3000 feet near NOWRA the turbulence started again. In the circuit area the pilot was doing those meaningful little things that a pilot does when coming into land. As I said earlier, I had considerable confidence in Brian's ability as a pilot and I was not concerned in the circuit – after all, there was nothing I could do; flying the aircraft was his part of ship!

On the run upwind at 900 feet the turbulence was again quite severe. In fact we gained 100 feet on the turn downwind and this was not caused by bad flying.. The airspeed at this time was around 250 knots decreasing to wheels down speed of 210 knots. I did my usual pre landing checks; there weren't many but because of the turbulence my navigation bag down by my right leg was bouncing around. I bent down to secure it. While I was doing that I felt the bang... I bolted upright! The windscreen was opaque. My radar was on my lap - I pushed it back. Fortunately it stuck in its cradle otherwise it ejected with me or I left my legs behind at the kneecaps. I switched on my microphone and shouted 'BIRDSTRIKE, EJECT, EJECT!!'

Naturally in a situation like this nothing works as it should. Of course the intercom was U/S. It says volumes for my power of command that the pilot heard me and responded in the only way possible - by ejecting the canopy. Normally it was the Observers job to do that little chore but these were not 'normal' times. I don't know where Brian got the extra hand from to release the canopy, but he did it. After all, at that time he had the control column back in his stomach getting height and the throttle full on getting power. I suppose it comes back to that old adage 'If you want something done in a hurry - ask a busy man.'

As soon as the canopy went, I went! No good hanging around at that time. In its normal flying position the Observers ejection seat is tilted slightly to the rear. When the canopy is ejected the seat springs forward to arm the ejection rocket. To fire the gun it is necessary to reach above the head and pull down the 'D' ring at the top of the ejection seat. Attached to the 'D' ring is a felt and canvas hood that covers the face to prevent injury to the head from wind blast, flames or other 'nasties' one may meet on the way out.

I felt nothing of the bang one would expect to feel in that portion of the anatomy one would expect to feel it. My first recollection was being clear of the aircraft and a recognisable moment when movement seemingly stops. I was hanging in the

air thinking, 'Is this automatic thing going to work automatically?' Then the straps holding me to the seat fell away. It felt an eternity until that jolt that stopped the fall and the parachute straps uncomfortably tightened on my body. I was hanging there. But I couldn't see anything – it's all so black!

Most people that have been in a life threatening situation will have experienced the adrenaline that races the mind. You think very fast indeed. I was thinking very fast indeed as I hung up there in the black but it wasn't black for long. WHOOMP! The aircraft hit the ground, seemingly in front of me and exploded. Flames shot into the air and again I realised that I was still airborne but this time without that comforting shell of the aircraft around me.

Night become day below me but in front things are still black. Hell I'm blind! I felt for my eyes and instead feel my helmet or more correctly, I feel the 'D' ring from the ejection seat is still over my head. I throw this off but its still dark. The visor on my 'bone dome' is down and the cloth cover is on it. I push this back and low and behold there was light! Not any old light though. Light that shows my partner dangling like me but between me and the flames from our downed aircraft. "Get out of there you bloody mug," I yell to him. I don't think he heard me but right now I had more problems of my own.

I realise I must be getting close to the deck and I start to wonder about landing. Like a flash those periods of dummy parachute drill race out of my mind. I can't think of a bleeding thing to do. Do I put my feet to the left, to the right, cross them spread them or what? I look down again and see I'm going to land in a gully. What's more that gully has steep sides and tree stumps! Oh hell what the heck. I'll withdraw my feet altogether and stick them up around my neck somewhere out of the way. Thus I landed on my back somehow but at the time all I felt was the exit of some wind (from the mouth) and considerable jubilation at still seemingly being in one piece.

Now to find that stupid pilot. Like me he was approaching the deck fast but his immediate concern was his proximity to the burning aircraft. I need not have worried because he must have remembered his safety equipment drills for he was not hurt on landing. Before long we were reunited and became very happy indeed.

We were alive!! We would fly again!

Meanwhile, back at the station all hell was breaking loose. The Air Traffic Control Staff had watched the whole event, saw us eject and sounded the alarm. The Fire Tender boys responded and raced to the scene. An interesting side story here. I understand one of the drivers thought he was driving a tank and did all sorts of wonderful things on the way to the crash site but I'll leave that one to the crew to tell. We all know how dedicated these fellows were (and I'll bet, still are). The duty chopper was scrambled and the medics prepared for whatever remains they got. Generally everything worked as it should. A soon as the ambulance arrived they whipped us back to the Sick Bay (instead of the Wardroom!), checked we were still whole, put us in bed, shot us full of morphine and left. Meanwhile, up in the Wardroom a party was building up. We missed it but some kindly soul did slip us a 'little something' later on in the evening.

I am sure the reader will appreciate that most of the trees around NAS NOWRA are not very big for obvious reasons. The one we lopped was 33 feet at our point of impact. Relax 'Greenies', it was already dead before we hit it.

The Martin Baker ejection seats fitted to the Sea Venom were

the best available at the time for. The manual for the seats indicated that to work automatically the seat needed to be 200 feet from the ground and have a forward motion of 200 knots. That they worked in our situation I thank Mr. Martin and Mr. Baker and our squadron maintainers, especially the Armourers and Safety Equipment lads.

The Board of Inquiry

Commander R.E.'Digger' BOURKE RAN being the specialist aged aviator, was the main inquisitor and a bloody thorough job he made of it too. He threw questions at Brian at a great rate of knots. He asked about his airspeed, his altimeter, his artificial horizon and his turn and bank Indicator. He asked when he did this and when he did that. He asked about his power setting and his dive brakes.

He was quizzed on stalling speeds in certain configurations, what 'G' did he pull, how he was flying at the time- normal or pulling the aircraft in the turn, how the control surfaces were reacting.

Then came the point of impact questioning.

"What was your speed at the time the windshield shattered?"

"Around 210 Knots"

"At that time were you turning or had you straightened up?"

"I was taking off bank, still turning."

"You were straightening up?"

"Yes. Slightly port wing down, slightly nose down."

The crunch questions.

"Could you find the undercarriage lever without searching for it?"

"Yes sir."

"You were on instruments all the way (in the turn)?"

"Yes sir."

"But yet you saw no increase or loss of height either on the altimeter or the vertical speed indicator?" asked Digger.

"To me", said Brian, "everything was in order as I selected undercarriage down and it was almost at the same instant that we hit the gust and the windscreen shattered."

The score at this point was slightly in favour of the pilot. He had the answers. He answered truthfully.

The questioning returned to the instruments. Brian was asked about his instrument hours and then about the instruments performance at the time of the turn downwind.

"What was your height at this point (again)?"

"900 feet"

"Did you see any alteration of the altimeter reading during the turn?"

"No."

"Did the artificial horizon indicate the aircraft was descending.?"

"No"

"Was the altimeter reading steady or oscillating as the ASI was?"

"It was fairly steady."

"Was it steady during the turn"

"Yes sir."

"Was the needle of the VSI steady during the turn?"

"No sir. Fluctuating quite a bit."

"Did you read the fall of speed pretty accurately between 250 and 210 knots?"

"It was impossible to get an accurate reading as it was fluctuating over 20 knots. It got to 210 and jumped to about 230 as I selected the undercarriage lever."

"What was the altimeter reading when you selected undercarriage down.?"

"1000 feet."

"After the first impact you applied power. Did you get any response from the engine and did your controls respond satisfactorily to any movement?"

"The sensation I had was of driving a car in mud and suddenly coming out onto good road. The controls seemed to be operating correctly but I was getting a lot of control changes as I was getting a lot of buffet."

"She was handling satisfactorily?"

"Yes. I was getting into the climb with wings level."

The pressure eased - the questions were answered satisfactorily and the crew are alive. How come?

"Was it an 'exemplary' ejection because of the drill between pilot and observer?. Was it because of briefings between the two or was it squadron drills?"

The pilot answered. "We carry out drills. On this occasion I couldn't contact my observer on the intercom so I jettisoned the canopy to let him know I had heard him shouting."

...so ended the inquiry .

Now what did their 'Boardships' in Navy Office think of this little lot.? You may well ask the question.

Firstly FOICEA (RADM George OLDHAM) was not very amused and had a few harsh words to threaten our future with, but DAWOT (Director of Air Warfare and Operational Training) in

Navy Office had a more moderate view and, fortunately for Brian and myself, his view prevailed. Naturally we both incurred the displeasure of the Naval Board.

Brian was informed that his actions were below the qualities expected and the Naval Board noted with concern the lack of knowledge in elementary parachute drill displayed by the observer. To that I say 'Amen'. I was required to carry out dog watch instruction in elementary parachute drill for one week.

We were informed of these findings by a somewhat bemused Captain of HMAS ALBATROSS, (Captain Tommy MORRISON.)

Hell's Bells! We were alive and our thanks still go to all those that made it possible. Brian learnt to fly better and I had dog watch instruction in elementary parachute drill. Fortunately I have not had to use those skills again.

What happened after a short spell of 'survivors leave'? Well, it was back to flying. Brian and I finished the course proper and we continued to fly together until the end of that month. I was posted (banished?) to 723 Squadron and Sycamore helicopters on 25 July 1960 then back to Venoms in 1961 while Brian went on to bigger and better things elsewhere.

But that, as they say, is another story for another day.

[Thank you, Sandy and Michael. Ed]

The author at RANAS NOWRA
Photo courtesy Michael Sandberg



MEDAL EXTENSION TO RECOGNISE DEFENCE SERVICE

Media Release – 10 April 2002

Eligible Australian Defence Force personnel who served in Vietnam, the Middle East, South East Asia and Irian Jaya will receive greater recognition for their service and sacrifice through extended medal entitlements, the Minister Assisting the Minister for Defence, the Hon. Danna Vale MP, announced today.

Minister Vale said the extension would see more service personnel receive this important, tangible mark of respect and thanks from a grateful nation.

"The extension of entitlements for the Australian Service Medal and Australian Active Service Medal will also help address some anomalies in the granting of these medals to our servicemen and women," Minister Vale said.

"In particular, the Government is pleased that anomalies in respect of the Australian Active Service Medal 1945-75 for Vietnam have been removed.

"The extension of the AASM 1945-75 to personnel serving in South Vietnam from 31 July 1962 allows some land-based personnel who had previously not been eligible, and the crew of HMAS Quiberon and HMAS Queenborough to be awarded the

medal for their service in early 1963."

Minister Vale said personnel in approved third country deployments with the United States and United Kingdom forces in Iraq between 16 July 1991 and 1 October 2001 would be recognised by the awarding of the Australian Service Medal with Clasp 'IRAQ';

"Personnel involved with survey operations in South East Asia between 6 May 1975 and 22 August 1975 will be recognised by the awarding of the Australian Service Medal with Clasp 'SE ASIA'," Minister Vale said.

"Personnel involved with the CENDERAWASIH series of survey operations in Irian Jaya between 1976 and 1981 will be recognised by the awarding of the Australian Service Medal with Clasp 'IRIAN JAYA'."

The Minister said applications would be processed in order of date of receipt. Application forms are available from Federal Members and Senators, or on Defence Internet Site:

http://www.defence.gov.au/dpe/dpe_site/honours_awards/resources/forms/ac694

If men can run the world, why can't they stop wearing neckties? How intelligent is it to start the day by tying a noose around your neck?