

An Account by SBLT Brian Dutch of events of a Night Sea Venom ejection, from the book "HMAS Albatross — A Collection of Memories"

During night flying on 15 June 1960 a Sea Venom being flown by SBLT Brian Dutch With LEUT Dave Sandberg as his observer malfunctioned and the crew carried out the first RAN night ejection:

'In June 1960 at the Naval Air Station, Nowra NSW, I was completing my night fighter phase of the Sea Venom (Operational Flying School) with 724 Squadron.

There was some pressure to complete the course as we were due to embark on HMAS Melbourne, and after two day sorties, I had two sorties to complete that night. After the first night trip I was debriefed and it was decided that I needed one more night sortie to consolidate. Lt E D (Sandy) Sandberg, the Senior Observer, and I climbed into another Sea Venom which was found to be unserviceable after 20 minutes airborne. We re-turned to Naval Air Station and climbed into a third aircraft and took off for the sortie. It was a cold winter's night with strong West to North West winds which had developed into standing waves over the mountains to the West of Nowra.

Well, Sandy and I completed the sortie and headed back to Nowra. On join-ing the circuit for Runway 26 we were advised that the wind was up to 35 degrees off the runway and gusting 25–50 knots. Although at the lower

wind strengths this was within the crosswind limits of the Venom, at the height of the gusts it exceeded limits. However, this was to become irrelevant by subsequent events!

As I turned the aircraft downwind and lowered the undercarriage, the aircraft rolled inverted in a gust of wind. As I was initially in a 60 degree banked turn and at 400 ft for the night circuit on those days, I immediately applied full aileron and then full rudder to roll the aircraft level.

We pilots all knew that the Venom did not roll around its longitudinal axis, due to its fuselage design, and it always dished or barrelled in the rolling plane. Well, I had managed to get the aircraft back to about 30 degrees to port heading the right way when there was a violent crunch, the wind-screen shattered and became opaque and the whole aircraft began to shake. I assessed that, as I had no forward visibility, the radome was probably shattered and the undercarriage was most likely damaged, we should eject!

Now at that stage the RN Sea Venoms had no ejection seat and the RAN Sea Venoms had been fitted with the Martin Baker Patent Ejector Seat MK 4A. As there had not been an ejection, there were several myths and rumours about the seat, particularly as the RAAF Sabre aircraft had an American seat and had had several fatal low level ejection.

Our seats were canted towards one another at about 4 degrees which meant that if both the pilot and observer ejected together the seats would collide above the aircraft, so the drill

was that the observer should eject the heavy canopy and then immediately eject himself. The limitation of the ejector seat, which was powered by 3 cartridges, was 200 knots of forward speed and 200 feet of height.

I pulled up the nose of the aircraft to about a 60 degree climb and put on full power to try to clear the ground. I remember seeing the altitude indicator showing a steep climb, the altimeter was rising and the air speed indicator (ASI) falling rapidly!

The next 30 seconds or so seemed to take ages! In good drill fashion I said to Sandy "EJECT, EJECT, EJECT"... No reaction. I looked at Sandy who had not responded. The intercom had obviously failed. My only option was to change my right hand from the control column and pull the canopy ejection myself to get the message across to Sandy.

As the canopy exploded clear I remember seeing Sandy's eyes like saucers as he reached for the canopy and ejected. With Sandy clear, I waited until the ASI was falling through about 110 knots and ejected myself.

There was a surging acceleration into the darkness, I felt the seat curving backwards and then a jerk as the canopy of the parachute deployed and I was floating downwards. Almost immediately the aircraft exploded on the ground just below me and I realised that I was drifting towards the fire. Once again I recalled my drills and remembered our lectures on controlling a parachute. I reached up and pulled the right hand lines.... "Christ, I'm drifting into the fire faster" I thought, as I quickly changed to the left lines

and landed just clear of the aircraft fire.

As I landed in a small tree with my feet in a stream, I could hear shouting and thought that it was Sandy shouting for help. I methodically undid my harness release and ran to assist Sandy. I got about 4 feet before I was jerked on to my back. I had forgotten to undo my emergency oxygen tube! Flushing with embarrassment in the darkness, I undid the tube and again ran to assist Sandy. Bang!... I ran into a fence. When I finally got to Sandy he was OK and said that he had been shouting at me as he could see me drifting into the fire and was trying to warn me!

We could hear the crash siren at the Air Station and sat in the darkness and waited for help. Sandy pulled out his cigarettes but he was shaking with shock so I lit his cigarette for him.

Next a crash tender arrived and I saw one of the tender crew walking gingerly around the crashed aircraft. In the light of the fire, I saw him trip on the stump of a Black Boy palm (as we were allowed to call them in those days). The man fell... I cannot recall his name... so I called out "Are you OK?" He replied in a shaky voice "Oh it's you, sir. I thought that I had tripped on your head!!"

Then the dear old Sycamore helicopter arrived, flown by Lt Cal Payne with Doctor Tommy Thompson aboard. Tommy was winched down to us to check us out. This was the first night winching with a Sycamore which was ill equipped for such work.

We were whisked away to the sick-

by only shaken up, and I was detained for the night for observation. Subsequently it was found that Sandy had injured his spine. He said that he thought he would injure his legs as he landed in the parachute, so to avoid this he pulled up his legs and thus... landed on his bum!

A Board of Inquiry was convened and headed up by Captain Ramsay who was then Captain of HMAS Creswell. In fatherly tones he said to me: "Tell us what happened in your own words, son".

I proceeded to explain that I had run "upwind". Being a cautious man he asked which way was that and I pointed it out on the map. "Go on" he said. I explained that I then broke downwind (turned down wind). "YOU BROKE WHAT?" said the Captain in stentorinous tones. Fortunately another of the Board explained the jargon and the saga of the Inquiry Board went on to its conclusion. I resolved at that stage that the Board should have only consisted of aviation experts.

It is interesting that immediately thereafter the circuit height for all air sorties was raised from 400 ft to 1,000 ft. They had realised that the terrain rose in the downwind position and of course was covered with trees, one of which I had hit. There had never been a full 400ft of clearance. Subsequently trees were lopped on that side of the airfield.

Some time later Sandy and I received a censure (in mild terms) from the Naval Board. As an enthusiastic sub-Lieutenant who was known as "The Fanatic" in those days, I was

bitterly disappointed and discussed it with the Captain of NAS, Captain T K (Tom) Morrison. With great wiseness he said "Don't worry about it, in time the Board will always remember your name and will not recall the details. Therefore they will assume you did well!"

He was right. I went on to earn a permanent commission and had a wonderful career with many more adventures and experiences. I also found that the ejection had proved to me that in a life threatening situation I would not 'freeze up and die', but that I would act instinctively to save myself. What wonderful years'.

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"UP AND DOWN" — AN UNIQUE EXPERIENCE

By: LCDR E.D. (Sandy) Sandberg — April 2001 From the RAN FAA Association Magazine "Slipstream" 2005

Sometime ago the Editor of SLIP-STREAM 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 Navy Office, but as the docu-

ments were over 30 years old, they had sent them to the Australian Archives. I obtained a copy from there.

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 & 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 todays 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 his 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 un-serviceable 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 Rolly Waddell-Wood) all over me 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 3,000 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 be-

cause of the very nasty 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 knee-caps. 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 auto-matically?" 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 hits the ground, seemingly in front of me and explodes. Flames shoot 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 have 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. As 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, 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. The use-by label 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.

Now comes 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 hori-

zon; his bank and turn indicator. He asked when he did this, 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 he 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 see any alteration of the altimeter reading during the turn?" "No." "Did the artificial horizon

descend?" "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?" "1,000 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.

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 that 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.

E.D. (Sandy) Sandberg