

Ramp Strike aboard HMAS Melbourne 01 Sept 1971 – Phil Thompson

(This text is an e-mail written in response to a question about which pilot was involved in this incident and the questioner's comment: '...it must have frightened the daylight out of you!') [Written for non-pilot readers.]

It was night time already — the 'daylights were already out of me' after the first night Deck Landing (DL). :-)
While this first one — as I found out later was not perfect, it didn't look so bad after my second NON night DL — the ramp strike. I was thereafter the pilot the sailors could approach to say "Geesus, Sir you scared the bejeezus out of me" and these guys were in the front (as the 'birdies' [FAA] liked to call the bow) or where ever. The admiral (not the captain) was in his cabin directly under the ramp. It had just been refurbished. He invited me up there to congratulate me on surviving and to show me (with good humour) the absolute chaos it had caused in his cabin, as the ceiling (made of painted cork) had fallen in on him. Above the cork ceiling (for soundproofing) were many inches of specially strengthened steel by the way. HMAS Melbourne's deck (generally) was remade (before this to be able to operate A4s) and in this area was supported by extra footings to enable it to take the A4 bumps in the landing zone.

I guess I had better days and nights but it was scary just to go out there for the first time. Not really knowing the drill, having a GCA (ground controlled approach) at low level to the 'slot' or 'groove' where we would start to look ahead see the ball and start the approach, monitored then by the LSO (Landing Signal Officer). So I guess the unknown is worse if it is poorly anticipated. However I knew that to be the reverse — complacent — was not an option. Jet pilots probably get addicted to the adrenaline rush. I'm sure most of the young pilots were just "powered by adrenaline" most of the time.

At this point the aim was to have about 20 day catapults (and about 2 times as many Deck Landings — touch and go and arrests) and depending, to then move on to Night DLs, as getting the ship time was not always easy. An RAN pilot does not have his wings confirmed officially until his first Day DL; so it is a big deal, for lots of reasons. My first DLs were onboard HMS Eagle on its farewell tour before being scrapped. But being a 'sprog newbie' I was only allowed to do 4 (hook up) Touch and Gos; but they still counted as day DLs. That was in 02 Aug 71. At that point I had done the required 100 day/night DDLs (Dummy Deck Landings) or the old term for these was MADDLS (Mirror Assisted Dummy Deck Landings).

Just before my first DLs on HMAS Melbourne I did a further 9 night DDLs on the 12th Aug & on 20th Aug 8 more by day, before doing 2 'hook up' (touch and go's) DLs on Melb for the first time on the 23rd, then I trapped for the first time on the 24th Aug with 6 DLs and 2 catapults (so 2 out of the six were traps, just wanted to make the point that there is no distinction between a hook up or hook down DL — if it is a good one). My ramp strike did not count as a DL. :-)

At this time of the year the westerlies (winds) are howling and it is freezing at Nowra. Not a good time for a swim. By 01 Sep I had 38 day DLs and 22 cats by day — the minimum experience (later changed to a larger requirement) to go out by night. As I say the first hook up Touch & Go was good enough; so I guess the second (also hook up) was fortunate in that had the hook been down — I may not have been here to tell you all this. The hook would have tried to rip off some deck plates and then it would have been goodnight.

It is probably obvious that lots of good things occurred to help me survive that night — apart from being silly enough to hit the ramp in the first place. Believe me it was not my intention to do so. Rather than go into details which require lots of explanation I'll just tell the story as it comes.

My memory of this approach as it started to go bad is pretty much burnt into my brain. So if this is describing "having the daylight out of me" then you are correct. :-)

As the ball (orange ball between line of green datum lights) started to drop rapidly as I was very close to Touch Down, I could see with my mind's eye that a series of bad events were unfolding. I had started high so had reduced power to get back to the glideslope. This is a pretty average start for a night DL from a Carrier Controlled Approach (GCA from the ship). But being inexperienced the juggling then required to get back to the glideslope etc. is the key.

Meanwhile the deck is moving — which is not always dampened at every point by the gyro mirror. The LSO (a fellow A4 pilot especially trained and experienced) watches the movement of the deck and how it is synchronising with the aircraft approach. The LSO's judgement overrides all others when the aircraft is in the groove. He grades and debriefs us after our DLs.

On this night another LSO from the S2 Tracker squadron was being trained on the A4 approach. He was very experienced on S2s and A4s in the States but had little night experience (with A4s) here. Not that this is an issue; but I make the point that any one accident is a combination of factors. In this case I can only take full responsibility 'fully' for not making a better approach; or whatever it would take to keep me away from the ramp. So please don't misconstrue this remark. I also make the point that most likely the weather/sea state was marginal for my experience (as a subsequent report stated); but one has to fly to the conditions and make one's own judgements, this is the nature of military flying.

As the ball started to really accelerate down, I was already powering up to a lot of RPM, as I had decided that it was "a ball of wax" and I was 'out-of-here'. Usually on a reasonable approach that, requires a bit of power, the LSO will smoothly say "Power". Sometimes when it is urgent he will start shouting rapidly "Power, Power, POWER" followed rapidly by "Wave Off, Wave Off, WAVE OFF" (if necessary) which we have to obey — even if it just a drill (practice Wave off) on an otherwise good approach.

I didn't get the "Power" but I got the "Wave Off" — this was how desperate my situation had become. Meanwhile I'm advancing the throttle to full power a microsecond earlier as I have decided for myself that the crap is in the fan. It takes an eternity for the A4 engine to develop full power (I'm joking) but it depends on the circumstances. Luckily the engine was accelerating already. Literally as the ball started to drop (from the deck moon lighting) I could see that I was going to go below the level of the deck (this surprised me tremendously). I was determined to make the best wave off I could, to get the maximum out of the Optimum Angle of Attack (this is how we land, at the OAOA) to maximise my survival. This is SOP anyway. [I was not "spotting the deck" and I was not seeing the deck or the mirror at this stage - after nose rotates up.]

The A4 had gone slightly below the deck [just my impression] (mostly because the deck gave an out of synch pitch up — this happens) but it compounded my problem. If you ever saw or imagine the round down then it is possible to be climbing out of the hole — so to speak — and be going UP before striking the ramp. This is more or less what happened but the only real witnesses — the LSOs — were not enjoying the show. Quite rightly they had both hit the safety net off the LSO's station. This is a big loss of face for them and they never let me forget it. Can you imagine jumping off the deck into the black void hoping there was a net below? [They did know that their safety net was there but they cannot see it or the water at night.] I was safe and warm in my A4. :-) [Subsequently the ship's SE on deck that night has confirmed the 'out of synch' pitchup.]

Of course there was an almighty bump as the wheels hit the deck and the U/C flexed so much that the inner brakes gouged the steel deck before the U/C broke — but I was going UP at the time — if I had still be going down it would have been all over. Thank goodness for relative motion etc.

The cockpit lit up with just about every warning light except the fire warning light, otherwise I would have ejected. Anyway I was concentrating on doing my best OAO climbout and checking things out. The ship was frazzled enough to direct me "east" to NAS Nowra from "mother", but I was heading west no matter what anyone said. The air controller had just been in the west off Perth so it was their habit to go east to land there.

I had minimum fuel but there was enough to fly at slow speed to NAS Nowra. Another A4 was airborne to take my slot for his own DLs. It was our senior pilot Leut Barrie Daly, who had a look at the dangling U/C & suggested I keep it down. This is SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) along with carrying the empty drop tanks to use as emergency U/C in such damaged landings. I had thought about this, and read about similar landings in our flight safety literature, so catching the wire just past the threshold on Runway 26 back at NAS Nowra, was not a problem. There was no time for foaming the R/W, and as I arrested (with a much longer pullout of the wire, as that is the nature of the wire at NAS), the scariest moment for me occurred. The drop tanks still had fuel vapour in them, which from the outside caused a spectacular WHOOSH of ignition & a brief tail of flames (remember this is night fireworks time) which I saw as a bloody catastrophe in the mirrors and the bright reflections around me.

The throttle was put to OFF and I was out of that cockpit (without needing the customary A4 ladder, because I was on the ground already) running to the edge of the R/W. —Phew— Spectators said they had never seen anyone run so fast. I agree.

Later I heard about what this event looked like from those on the ship. They said the shower of sparks was amazing, as the steel met steel. I was lucky also that the undercarriage leg stubs did not catch a wire, that would have been catastrophic. So I was airborne again before reaching the No. 1 wire. You can see on the photo how the black tyre marks start/stop and the gouges of the brake mechanism (inside the wheel) on the steel deck (before it broke, along with everything else related to the U/C). [Later I was told that paint marks from the drop tank fins were on the deck but painted over quickly - so I never saw them myself.]