

Ditching

In my log book of 1974 vintage, there are three pages each with 26 blank lines to record my 'Flying Accident History'! Perhaps that is indicative of the expectation of the day.

Certainly, it was unusual at the time, if you were rotary aircrew and you had not ditched in a helicopter. I had two experiences of ditching, once as the 'ditchee' in Wessex 818 on 19 Nov 1974 and eleven months later as the rescuing helicopter after the ditching of Sea King 906 on the night of 21 Oct 1975.

In fine weather, with Wessex 815 leading we took off at 1415 to join some surface units for two hours of ASAC training. We coasted out somewhere around Currarong and were transiting at approximately 500 feet in loose line astern when the pilots felt something unusual, a small unidentifiable vibration. Rather than transit to the exercise area only to transit home again the aircraft captain decided to conduct a test 'dip' to see if it was going to be a problem at higher power levels. We descended to 'jump height' of 125 feet, engaged the flight control system (FCS) and transitioned into a 30 foot hover in about 10 kts of south-easterly breeze and a low swell. The well worn routine commenced.

'Lower the ball' 'Roger lowering the ball to 50 feet' 'Engage'. The sonar transducer was lowered into the water on the hydraulic reeling machine and a cable hover reference was selected.

The pilots were busy getting the antiquated FCS system stabilised and there was no conversation regarding the vibration felt earlier. There was however a conversation on 'private' intercom in the rear cabin. The aircrewman, on my left operating the sonar had just completed his Operational Flying Training. I noticed that he was having difficulty with his seat and his ability to see the sonar display. I suggested that he put his shoulder harness back on and move his seat forward, which he did.

It was at this point that time stood still and the indelible sensation entered my brain; the sound of that single Rolls Royce Gnome turbine winding down to zero revs in approximately one second and a second later in complete silence impacting the water with a shattering force. I never realised that ten tons from 30 feet could fall so quickly and stop so suddenly. In an amazing instinctive reaction the co-pilot had managed to transmit 'mayday mayday' in between the engine stopping and the impact.

Almost immediately, the cabin filled with water and slowly tipped to the right. At this stage I was most impatient as the aircrewman seated next to the port side window seemed to be dreadfully slow to pop the window and unbuckle. It was day time and pre-helicopter underwater escape training (HUET) so the opportunity was right there to squeeze out the window and I wanted to take it and quickly.

By the time my oppos feet were out, the window was horizontal and water was up to my chest. As I poked my head out and heaved with my arms my backpack dinghy got momentarily caught. I remember a brief adrenaline surge at the prospect of going down with the aircraft just before I broke free with wildly kicking legs. I was the last one out. The two pilots seated high in the airframe and next to their wide access, sliding windows were out first. The left hand seat pilot yelled a warning at me as I swam clear. A broken rotor blade drooped dangerously close to my head. I couldn't see the co-pilot and yelled for him. Then to our relief he appeared from the other side of the partially floating wreckage.

Instinctively we each inflated our lifejackets released our dinghy packs pulled on the inflation lanyard and dragged ourselves in, just as we had drilled many times before in the ditching pool in calmer and more frivolous circumstances.

We gathered together facing each other and burst into incredulous laughter 'we ditched!' 'unbelievable!'

Very soon our consort 815 appeared, nose down and heading straight for us. We splashed and they soon had us visual. I had a terrible feeling as we were winched 'Do I really want to be rescued by another Wessex?' 'Ah well, no choice really'. I was very glad to hop out a few minutes later at the Naval Air Station to be whisked off in an ambulance to the sickbay for the routine check up. Result, a few bruises and a few scratches each.

WHAT ARE THE ENDURING LESSONS?

If in doubt stop and check. We did the right thing by stopping to check a suspicious vibration. Engine failure in a 30 foot hover is much better than at 125 feet at 90 knots. The dangers of low level autorotation are much more severe.

Make sure you don't compromise safety for convenience or comfort. Our aircrewman could have been injured badly if he had not fixed his harness moments before the crash. If he had been injured I would have had severe difficulties getting him out and/or getting out past him.

Abandon aircraft drills and dinghy drills might be boring but they are not a waste of time. Our egress was successful but a moment's hesitation or confusion could have been disastrous.

Look out for each other. The timely warning saved me getting skewered by a rotor blade.

We deserved more money for flying underpowered, unreliable, single engine helicopters, day and night in all weather with no radar or nav aids with a dodgy flight control system... but we loved it!

LCDR Jones is awarded a \$200 cash prize for his article submission to TOUCHDOWN magazine. Congratulations.



ABOVE THE ACCIDENT AIRCRAFT WESSEX 818

....the aircrewman seated next to the port side window seemed to be dreadfully slow to pop the window and unbuckle.

Despite their unreliability and uninhabitability we loved the old Wessex and still do. In 1974 the ASW Wessex 31B was approaching the end of its active service and we had crews training in the UK on our new Sea Kings. HS 817 Squadron was part of the Air Group, providing ASW protection for the Carrier HMAS Melbourne. We didn't know that we were going to be operating in Darwin that Christmas in the aftermath of cyclone Tracey but we did know that we were off to RIMPAC in a few months and we were working towards that embarkation planned for early 1975.