



What a Night

TOUCHDOWN

The replacement of the Wessex with the Sea King was a revolution in terms of stability of the hover, crew comfort, navigational accuracy and power margins. I remember the significant change in flying atmosphere from anxiety and tension in the Wessex to calm and confidence in the Sea King. I was on the first Operational Flying Training Course to be run in Australia and was revelling in the ability to see the world on the radar and navigate accurately on the ground stabilised plot. In addition the hydraulic oil no longer dripped on your head and you could hear clearly on the intercom! Rear crew could also 'fly' the aircraft in winching situations using the auxiliary hover trim. We were revelling in this new technology and vastly improved capability.

Consequently there was only one fully qualified Sea King aircrew in the crew of four, the QHI. The sortie went as briefed. We divided Shoalhaven Bight into two and our consort 906 was operating to the north, flying the typical jump profiles familiar to ASW dipping helos, 200 feet transits and transitions to 40 ft hover, lowering the transducer to 50 ft. It was a black moonless night and I was switching between scales on the ground stabilised plot, monitoring our separation and practising my jump navigation. The pilot under training was busy learning the system.



ABOVE THE INCIDENT AIRCRAFT SEA KING 906

Sea King Flight was yet to become the new 817 and we were gradually training up our new squadron of Sea King aviators and maintainers.

I was completing my OFT and was programmed to fly a 'mutual' night sortie teamed with an aircrewman under training and no rear seat instructor. The sortie was a jumpex for pilot training and only involved basic jump navigation from the rear crew.

The adrenaline kicked in hard when we heard the mayday call. '906 ditching'. 'Where are they?' came the call from my pilots. I had a mild panic as I switched back to my large scale plot and tried to re-orientate myself and find the transponder return. Two sweeps and I marked the position with my grease pencil then it disappeared.

Phew!! I had a heading to pass and conned the aircraft to 'on top'. The pilots did a standard circuit with wreckage and survivors. I racked my brain to try to remember how many were onboard and who they were but the brain must have shut down on that currently irrelevant information and I concentrated on setting up for a live night winch. This evolution is notoriously difficult in a helicopter with a huge downwash on a dark night and even worse with an inexperienced crew and a medium swell.

The first winch took forever, probably 20 minutes as we adjusted to the conditions, low swell, debris everywhere, targeting the survivor, establishing a stable hover, coping with the spray and light reflections and trying to stay calm. The next three went much more smoothly and we received confirmation of the number of (POB) from NAS and were on our way with our bedraggled cargo.

906 suffered a total loss of main rotor gear box oil. There was a choice of flying to the beach, only a few miles away but the captain made a bold decision to conduct a controlled ditching rather than risk gearbox failure and an uncontrolled crash. He later confided that he felt a very real 'guiding presence' behind him during the incident. The aircraft rolled over on landing due to the sea state. The crew had some difficulty exiting the aircraft and were considered lucky to have found their exit after being disoriented inside. Again it was pre Australian HUET although some of the aircrew had completed HUET in the UK.

The accident was very significantly the first major Sea King loss and so soon after acceptance. It was sobering to realise that with the huge advancement in technology we were still vulnerable to catastrophic ditchings. Additionally, we had lost 10% of our capability in one night.

WHAT WERE THE LESSONS?

Don't let technology lull you into complacency.

With experienced leadership even an inexperienced crew can achieve a successful outcome. The calming influence of the aircraft captain and the trust he placed in his crew was a very significant enabling factor.

Always be prepared for the worst scenario. If I asked the question 'what if my consort ditches?' I would have been better set up to mark their position. I only just managed to plot them before they 'disappeared'.

Aviation safety has improved dramatically since these days but I believe the lessons stand the test of time. I trust that as we heed these lessons we won't need pages in our log books titled 'Flying Accident history'.

BELOW THE UPTURNED AIRCRAFT ALONGSIDE HMAS CRESWELL WHARF

