



by LCDR Mark Ogden RAN (Retd)

**O**N 23 May 1979, Sea King N16-098 ditched into the sea approximately 350 nm east of Jervis Bay, NSW while preparing to land on board HMAS MELBOURNE.

Ditching an aircraft, unlike ejecting, requires an incredible amount of conscious effort and planning. Helicopters unfortunately do not possess equipment to enable a rapid exit in case of an in-flight emergency. Therefore, crews and passengers who fly in helicopters must accept the fact that they will have to ride the machine to earth in the event of a catastrophic emergency.

Ditching into water presents many problems which need to be realised by both aircrew and passengers alike. However, if you subconsciously run through the ditching procedures pertaining to your particular aircraft, it may just save your life if and when the real thing happens.

The following account of the accident involving RAN Sea King N16-098 was written by Mark Ogden who, at the time, was the copilot of the ill-fated helicopter.

Having spent three years in training through 1FTS and 2FTS, then 5SQN and HC723, I was finally going to sea as a Sea King copilot in HS817. Here I was, my first day at sea in the Navy on board HMAS MELBOURNE. One of the more senior members of the squadron took me to the gun direction platform to watch real aviation; ie, what happens on the flight deck of an aircraft carrier. I watched in amazement as the first aircraft, an A-4 Skyhawk came over the 'round-down' and took a wire. But I was even more amazed when the wire broke! The A-4 [N13-154909] departed the flight deck and without enough speed to keep flying, disappeared over the angle. LEUT Kev Finan USN (now airline pilot), ejected at the last possible moment and survived unhurt. I remember thinking, well I joined the navy for excitement but, wow! That was back in May 1979, and that same day, I too was to find out what swimming was all about.

I was one of the crew that ditched in Sea King helicopter N16-098 well out to sea off Jervis Bay after our aircraft suffered a total loss of tail rotor authority. In addition to myself, as copilot, the crew comprised LCDR Vic Battese (captain), LEUT Mal Wright (observer), and LSA Mick Skewes (aircrewman).

The following account of the accident involving my recollection of events drawn from an article I wrote soon after getting a little more than feet wet. Hopefully, my grammar has improved a little.

Other than Vic, the captain, who was the squadron's senior pilot, the crewmembers had all recently graduated from operational flying training. I was the wettest behind the ears and probably made a good representation of a clown on side show alley – eyes wide open and a gob to suit. Anyway, we briefed for an ASW sortie and covered all aspects of the mission and emergency procedures. The aircraft pre-flight didn't reveal any problems so we boarded, started the machine and departed from the ship in company with another Sea King. It was during the first transition to the hover that the observer and aircrewman noted a strange vibration coming from somewhere above their heads. As happens, us pilots up front couldn't feel or hear the vibration but we tried a few more hovers to trouble-shoot the problem. With no indication of a control problem, but the crew still voicing their concerns, Vic decided to abort the sortie and return to the ship.

### The 'fun' starts

We arrived shortly after and established a hover off the port beam. Then, when we began to slide right, the vibration and noise increased so dramatically that even us pilots began to appreciate that we had a problem! The captain stopped the movement towards the ship, a move that probably saved our lives and the lives of many on the ship's flight deck. Seconds later, there was a loud bang and the aircraft violently yawed right. Things were happening fast, real fast. Realising that the aircraft had lost tail rotor control, Vic called for me to retard the engine speed select levers. I remember being intrigued by what was happening, not hearing a word he said and basically going along for the ride. I just wasn't prepared for this! Vic lowered the collective and we hit the water real hard. Flipping inverted, the Sea King rapidly filled with water. My words and feelings are not printable, but I'm sure you get the idea. As well as the problems we faced, the ship's crew had to contend with pieces of rotor blade flying in all directions across the flight deck.

After all movement ceased (well I think it had), I released my harness and attempted to jettison the window next to me. For some reason, my right side shoulder strap wouldn't release and the window wouldn't jettison. Things were not going well.

Now, just as an aside, in 1979 the RAN didn't have any such thing as Helicopter Underwater Escape Training (HUET), nor had the (Helicopter Emergency Egress Device (HEEDs) been invented – and we didn't have emergency escape lighting. We talked about how to get out but never practised it wet.

It was very dark, I was disorientated with the helicopter being inverted and I thought we were sinking. I couldn't get out of my harness and I couldn't release my window. About then, I remember feeling a real sense of panic come flooding over me. I really thought that this was it, I'm going to die. My first day at sea and I'm going

to cark it in a bloody Sea King and I hadn't even been overseas!

I remember Vic also having problems and I probably wasn't helping. I gave up and started to gulp water into my lungs. However, this resignation to my untimely end probably helped us. Vic released his dinghy and exited a 9-inch window opening (I thought it was my window but he reckoned it was his). I was now moving more freely and I released my dinghy and went for a window. I started to exit through the window but then my foot jammed between the seat and centre console. I re-entered the cab, got my foot free and somehow exited the window with the dinghy in tow and floated or swam to the surface.

These days I work for the Bureau of Air Safety Investigation. Now, BASI doesn't like the term 'luck', but, sorry, I was lucky to survive. However, I will remember the lessons I learnt that day for the rest of my life.

In the original article, which I wrote nearly 20 years ago for RAAF *Spotlight*, I highlighted the problems that I experienced, particularly those concerning my equipment. Perhaps not surprisingly, the problems facing anyone in a ditching situation today haven't changed much; disorientation, exacerbated by survival equipment problems, may well lead to panic. Disorientation will always be an issue and training is probably the biggest factor in overcoming it. Sure, improvements in lighting will help, but it all counts for nought unless you have the basics weighed off. There is no replacement for HUET and the more times one can practise the escape drills wet, the greater the chance of survival in the real situation. And the training doesn't stop with the occasional HUET. After my little experience, on those occasions when I found myself flying over expanses of water, I realised that I was mentally practising the escape procedures and noting where everything was.

At the time, the bulkiness of the equipment, the snagging of the old helmet visors and the springy mic-tel leads were identified as impediments to a smooth escape. Gladly, I can report that the RAN seems to have learned those lessons (just don't let the system 'unlearn' them over time).

But what was the major lesson I learned that day? Rule No 1, don't panic. It is easy to say, particularly whilst I'm sitting here in front of my computer screen drinking coffee, but I can't emphasise enough the importance of not panicking. Again, HUET helps. HEEDs helps too (knowing it's there helps a lot). But, I keep thinking of that cartoon of the helicopter pilot who's sweating it out because if it hasn't gone wrong yet, it's about to. You do have to be mentally prepared for the worst, because when you're least prepared, fate will strike.

I want to finish by quoting the last paragraphs of my 1979 report:

Pre-planning and constant awareness can and will save your life. However, all this can be a waste of time if you panic. Control it and you should be okay. The less you leave to Lady Luck, the better are your chances of living.