



AS IT HAPPENED

BY

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AN INCIDENT WAITING TO HAPPEN

Like so many aspects of life, numerous flying incidents and accidents do not just happen, but are often the culmination of factors in which each contributes to produce a critical situation. Let me tell you about such a series of events which occurred during the 1960s.

Three No.10 Squadron (RAAF) SP2H Neptunes and crews from Townsville's Joint User (military/civil) airport at Garbutt were on a routine deployment to RAAF Base Richmond, west of Sydney, for a few days of exercises with Royal Australian Navy (RAN) submarines based at HMAS Platypus, Sydney. Our return to Townsville was scheduled for the week before Christmas.

The Richmond tarmac was due to be renovated, with work to start on 17th December. The Neptunes had approval to depart on that morning, provided they were airborne before 0700, when work was to begin.

In order to utilise the submarines effectively we flew sorties around the clock for four days. At the end of the exercise there was a relaxed attitude and a certain amount of letting down of the hair on the night before departure.

As I mentioned, three 10 Squadron crews had participated in the exercise. However, a fourth aircraft had just completed a major servicing at the Richmond aircraft depot, so four aircraft had to return to Townsville. That presented no great problem. Each of the three crews comprised a full Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) crew, so there were plenty of people to man the four aircraft for the transit to Townsville. There was one exception, that being that we had only six pilots. Normally, each aircraft carried a pilot and a co-pilot, so we were effectively two pilots shy.

The Commanding Officer (CO) proposed that he and the Qualified Flying Instructor (QFI) should each nominate an experienced crew member to act as co-pilot. As QFI I selected a senior experienced navigator as my co-pilot. Earlier in the week, I had flight-tested the aircraft which had just come out of maintenance, and I was to fly it on the trip back to Townsville.

Because we had to be airborne by 0700, I requested an early call for 0430. I was duly awakened by the duty steward, but promptly went back to sleep, to be awakened a second time by a crew member after I did not appear at flight planning for our trip. By now it was 0530.

As you may imagine, my bag was packed fairly quickly - and I had no time for breakfast. The navigator for the flight had completed flight planning for a straightforward transit home. However, in the absence of a qualified co-pilot, I had to carry out the 'pilot's pre-flight inspection'.

The CO had decreed that we would practise a 'stream' take-off at 20 second intervals. I was to be number three in the stream and the CO was number four. Taxi clearance was obtained and we were reminded that the airfield would close at 0700. We had just enough time to taxi and get airborne by that time.

The first two aircraft got airborne as planned and in turn, I started the take-off roll. All was well until just before 'refusal speed' (the fastest speed at which the take-off run may be aborted), when I heard a whine like the sound of an overspeeding propeller. Checking the gauge, I saw that the needles which indicate propeller speed were split, with one still increasing. In visual presentation, these needles were superimposed one on the other on the same gauge, one marked 'L' and one 'R'. The needles should have been together.

Decision time! Instant decision time!

In the following explanation of what had to be achieved I ask you to visualise that the actual time frame of the pilot's mental and physical activities was in the order of a few - a very few - seconds.

I would not take off with an overspeeding propeller, but the CO in the following aircraft had commenced his take-off run and was only 20 seconds behind me!

There really was no option.

First tell the co-pilot to pull off the jet power (he did), and at the same time pull back the main power levers myself. (The co-pilot handled the power levers for the two jet engines situated outboard of the main engines and used to augment power on take-off).

Next, rapidly advise the CO what was going on and in doing so, alert the emergency services.

Standard take-off practice was for the co-pilot to operate the radios while the captain remained on aircraft intercom. But in this situation, I needed to use the radio myself to broadcast my message. To do this I had to reach down to the intercom box, select 'Radio', then call urgently "Number three aborting"!

At the same time I commenced braking and reached automatically for the propeller reverse levers. I actually had them in my hand when my subconscious flashed an urgent message "Don't do that! One of the propellers is US (unserviceable)".

I continued braking. The runway end was rapidly coming closer and I was very aware that the brakes were noticeably fading. In the midst of my concentration I glanced up to see the plan view of the CO's aircraft turning away above me and to my right. Relief was paramount.

We eventually came to a stop not too far from the end of the runway. In company with our relief we all had that uncomfortable feeling that the mandatory abuse of our brakes could cause them to burst into flame.

After a cooling-off period, I tried taxiing very gently, and managed to get back to the tarmac where I was met by the senior engineering officer from the depot.

When I told him we had an overspeed, he asked a very natural question: "Which one"? I paused. Everything had happened so quickly, I wasn't sure, but I thought it was the left

prop. However, the air electronics officer (AEO) in the seat just aft of the cockpit thought it was the right one. The acting co-pilot wasn't sure. The engineer wasn't too impressed with our verbal report, because now he had to check both propellers.

Meanwhile, the workers were waiting to get on with the tarmac renovation, The CO sought permission to land and pick up my crew and take us home for Christmas. After some negotiation and cajoling, he was allowed to land. We boarded his aircraft and took off uneventfully for Townsville. I was in the right-hand seat replacing the AEO leader who had been acting as the CO's co-pilot.

When we settled down at top of climb, the CO asked for the story. I told him of the overspeed and he too asked the natural question "Which one"? I had to admit once again that I didn't know. He suggested that I had better figure it out before we reached Townsville so I could put it in my report.

On arrival at Townsville, the CO and the rest of the officers went off to attend the Airmen's Christmas Dinner while I spent the next hour at headquarters compiling the Incident Report. Unfortunately, identification of the guilty propeller had to be left to the engineers at the depot.

This series of events remained in the 'incident' category. That it could have been otherwise doesn't bear thinking about.

Oh yes. You may be interested to know that all this happened on my wedding anniversary, helping to fix that date in my mind.