

ERROL'S DAY



Today is the 14th February 1956.

I am Errol O'Hara, an LAC Armament mechanic, and a member of the 77 Fighter Squadron that is stationed at Williamtown.

This is where we operate the MK8 Meteors, and today's program is Air to Air gunnery.

The first detail should be airborne by 0900. At 0800 most of us armourers are at the eastern end of the ORP (Ordinance Readiness Platform), waiting for the Meteors to be taxied down to start the arming up procedure. As usual, we are sitting on two trolley loads of boxes, full of ammunition, including a supply of B.F.M (Belt Feed Mechanism) for the day's program.

A tent has been erected on the grass, just off the hard standing. It is used as a flight hut to control the day's schedule. Tables and chairs are provided for comfort, not much, but it suits all.

All the chocks and battery carts are lined up on the ORP, and in position waiting for the aircraft to arrive. All the engine fitters and airframe fitters are waiting to marshal the aircraft to their appropriate spots. Before long, this area will have at least eight aircraft in position, and maybe two more as spares.

The first few aircraft's are taxied down. They have already been pre-flight checked on the flight line. As soon as the pilots are out of their cockpits, the armourers are left to arm up. The Meteors have four Hispano 20mm cannons and they are a great aircraft to work on.

We armourers are divided into four teams of two, and in no time we have the first four detailed aircraft ready, plus a spare. (After all, we are experts in arming and turn arounds, as is expected of us.) All Meteors have had all four guns armed with 60 rounds per gun, but only two will be plugged in on each sortie.

I proceeded over to the flight tent to sign the EE77 of my aircraft as armed and serviceable.

I spotted a two seated pilot trainer Meteor MK7 A77-702, taxing to the ORP. It was going to be the "target tower" for the day, so I decided to ask the Officer in charge what the chance would be in getting a spare seat?

Seat confirmed.....great!

All I need now was some flying gear. Most of the pilots were Sergeants (and a few Officers) there at the time. I managed to borrow a leather helmet, oxymask and a mae west from a sergeant pilot who was on the second detail.

By now the Mk7 had shut down, and was waiting on the ORP. This gave me time to be strapped in the back seat. I was in, and ready!!!! All I had to do was to wait for the pilot, Flight Sergeant Geoff Talbot (a tall thin man, and a very experienced and capable pilot) to do his external checks.

Time to go!!!! Pilot is strapped in, engines started, external batteries disconnected, chocks removed.

Our call sign for the day is “Despot Tugboat”. The pilot is cleared by the tower to move down the runway facing westward.

I can see the two armourers at the target end of the tow line, on standby waiting for us to pass the airstrip. For about another 1000 feet we were marshalled to a stop by two more armourers, that were there in charge.

CPL Keith “Dad” Roddom, and his offsider, disappeared under the Meteor to hook up the target cable to a release unit at the rear of the centerline (Ventral) fuel tank.

This steel cable is 1000 feet long, and has an extra length of 100 feet of webbing strap. The target banner is orange and is 30 feet long and 6 foot wide, with a big black ball painted in the centre for its aiming point.

With the cable all hooked up, “Dad” marshalled the Meteor forward about 20 feet to take the tension on the cable. With this done, he stops the meteor. With thumbs up to the pilot, were ready to go!

With acknowledgements all done, the pilot lets me know..... “Here we go Gus”

The engines are roaring, and the aircraft begins to vibrate for a few seconds. Then the brakes release and we start racing down the strip. This is my first ride in a Jet aircraft, and those two Rolls Royce Derwent engines are certainly giving some push. With correct speed obtained, the control stick is pulled way back, and the Meteor climbs steeply. It gathers height quickly, as the banner has to leave the ground before we reach the end of the airstrip. We’re reaching plenty of height now, and we’re still climbing.

The pilot does a 180 degree turn to the port, and is facing seaward. Looking over to my port side of the aircraft, I can see two Meteors taking off from the airstrip of Williamtown. Williamtown has never looked so good!

The pilot tells me ‘Hey Gus! Turn your intercom off!! You’re making too much noise’. (Heavy breathing). Still climbing, the meteor crosses Stockton Bight. By now, those Meteors that I had seen taking off have caught up, and flying 200 to 300 feet off our port side, and are too far away to take some photos. In a short time, we are on the ‘Air to Air’ range about 20,000 feet.

The pilot of the Mk7 clears the two fighters to commence shooting. This done, the first aircraft peels off and disappears behind the tugboat. Seconds later, he appears starboard and barrel rolls over us and forms up on the other fighters’ port.

Each aircraft (in turn) has about six passes. Each consuming some time, they form up and let the ‘tugboat’ pilot know they have fired out. He tells them to switch off guns, and return to base. Two other shooters should be here soon. About 5 minutes has now passed, the pilot has now asked me to look for those two Meteors. So, with my steely blue eyes piercing the sky, I found them.

“There they are 11 o’clock high” I said. I knew what to say, as a couple of years ago I had seen the movie “12 o’clock High”

While they are shooting at the banner, I took the time to admire the instrument panel. So far I have flown in a Catalina, Beaufighter, Ryan STM, Tiger Moth and a Dakota. This is the first time I’ve had a big instrument panel all to myself, and it looks like a sea of Chinese faces, as they all look alike to me.

There are no armament switches on board, as this aircraft does not carry any weapons. I found the undercarriage lever, and those three yellow lights (must be ok?). I also found the three fuel gauges at the bottom of the panel.

The back seat area of this duel is quiet big, with plenty of arm room. There are no floor coverings, and you can see the bottom of the fuselage. There are two slides to rest the feet on, which lead up to the rudder

pedals. There are also no ejection seats in the Mk7, but a bucket seat is provided to sit on with a dingy pack, and a back pack parachute is there. If in an emergency, and in a low level, you can't get out. But at higher altitudes, the canopy is jettisoned as the aircraft rolls onto its back. Just release the seat harness, and kick yourself out of the cockpit. (Taking care not to hit the tailplane on the way out.)

About an hour has passed, and we have flown up and down the air range quiet a few times. Seeing Broughton Island on every turnaround, the last two Meteors have finished their shoot and the pilot has advised them to check that gunnery switches are off, and head back to base.

We are now losing height, and are heading for Williamtown.

"Willy Tower Despot Tugboat", the pilot calls base. He has asked for priority landing, as we are getting short on fuel. The tower clears us for his request, and as we are now getting lower I can sight Williamtown as we head for Stockton Bight.

The banner we are towing must now be full of holes, as the armourers have done a lot of work to this stage.

There is a crew who work in the ammunition preparation area, the "Banner Party Crew", and there's us guys, who arm the aircrafts. The aircrafts that have been shooting at this target, have had different colours on their ammunition, so each pilot knows his result.

Getting much lower now over the sand. The pilot lines up left of the runway, and slow as we pass over the fence. As we continue on, about 2000 feet along the side of the airstrip, the banner and cable have now been dropped. Now free of the cable, the pilot accelerates and does a tight port turn, levels out and lowers the undercarriage.

Looking at the landing gear lever panel, I see a green light, and two red lights. "This is not good"! I thought.

The landing gear goes up and down twice more, and then the pilot notifies the tower of our problem. The starboard main and the nose wheels were indicating "not locked down" on each occasion.

Now those red lights looked to me as though they were getting bigger and BIGGER, and looking like big red saucers to me.

We are almost on the ground, when the pilot tells the tower that the wheels won't lock, and has elected to "belly land". He accelerates again, and gains a bit more height and does another tight port turn, jettisoning the ventral tank. "Dad" Roddom, is on his tractor (the ones with the big wheels at the back and little one at the front). He was retrieving the cable and banner which we had dropped, and seen the empty tank tumbling down. He made a hasty retreat.

This turn was pretty tight and very low, as the trees did not look to be far away. By now, the "crash alarm" would have been sounding at the control tower, and the emergency services activated. With wheels retracted, we line up with the airstrip.

I looked at the fuel gauges..... "EMPTY"!!

No more circuits on this flight!!!!.

With a quick glance of the starboard side, I see all the aircrew and ground crew standing on the wings of the Meteors getting an advantage point to see the belly land.

A message from the pilot to "Tighten up your seat belt Gus!!" (there was no need to tell me that. The guy that strapped me in had done it that tight, even a fart couldn't escape!)

Surprisingly, it was a smooth landing. With no jolt, just a scraping noise that got louder.

(As I mentioned before, I had been in a Catalina and it made the same noise landing on water, but this one was smoother.)

The aircraft slides to a stop. Smoke is coming from the Starboard engine. The canopy is flung open (and it's a big canopy too)

The pilot yells "Get out quick Gus"

I quickly released the seat harness,.....ok

The parachute,easy

Rotate the turn buckle. Hit.....NOTHING!....."@#%\$"

Hit again.....NOTHING.....”@#\$\$%”

Thinking.....thinking.....Safety clip, remove, HIT.....a success,

Parachute released and I'M OFF!!!.

Now, the pilot had been calling me “Gus” a few times now. So this was hardly the time to tell him my name was not Gus! but Errol, as he had both feet on the ground and ready to run. I stood up to get out, and forgot to unplug the intercom and oxy hose. (more seconds wasted unplugging). As quick as lightning, I'm over the side, with feet on the ground. I can hear the crash truck coming. With the mae west still attached to the dinghy pack by a lanyard (I panicked a bit) I tried to break it with my hands, but I couldn't.

By now the pilot is about 30 – 40 feet away and running.

I reached into the cockpit and pulled the dinghy pack out. Half the parachute comes out. I disconnect the dinghy from the parachute, drop the dinghy on the ground, and started to run. After about 20 feet, the Mae West was still attached to the dinghy. It had tripped the gas bottle, and had started to inflate the pack. By now, the crash trucks had arrived, and I ran in between them with an inflating dinghy in hot pursuit behind me!

The pilot was now on his way back to the aircraft.

He stops and puts his hand on my shoulder and asks, “Are you ok???”

“Yes, I am ok”. It is now, that I found the simple release unit and unclipped the dinghy.

The fire crew was manned by the “Duty Crew”. Its main purpose was to look after visiting aircraft to the base. Firefighting was also part of the job. With the fire out and still a lot of commotion around, and with my helmet and oxymask still hanging nonchalantly over my shoulder, I walked around with my camera and took a few photos.

I went over to the ambulance there, and the Sergeant medic asked how I felt. I told him I had a very dry mouth. All he had was some orange syrup, which was quite thick. I took a mouthful, which was enough.

This ambulance was one of those old Ford Blitz truck, with a big square box on the back, and a big red cross around it.

You know, WW11 stuff!!!

The aircraft was now surrounded by squadron pilots, and other officers all looking. Everything was happening. The crane had arrived, and the Sergeant Pilot that I had borrowed the gear from came over to get it back. (So I can't be posing anymore!) Within minutes, a jeep arrived, and took me back to the ORP and I was greeted with a very warm reception.

In no time at all, I was back to work.

There was aircraft to be serviced, and armed.

About an hour later, an officer approached me and said I had to see the base doctor. The doctor asked if I had been hurt?? “No!” I replied. And then, how did I feel?? “Good!” I said... “OK then, back to work” he says. What a great interview!!!

I walked back to the armament section, and spoke to F/SGT Johnson. Talked for a while, and after, had me dropped back to the ORP, where I finished my day!

Well, what a day!!!

Its been a great day. A very exciting day.

The emergency in the air only lasted a few minutes. I don't think I was frightened or scared, as everything had happened so fast.

I may have panicked a bit (BIG bit) but, I knew I was in safe hands with the pilot, Geoff Talbot, who at all times, was in complete control.

I can now add another aircraft to my 'flown in' list.

I joined the RAAF as a cooks assistant, and re-mustered to armament. I have always been proud of my trade, my squadron, my work mates, and the great aircraft I have worked on.

But today, was MY day. And not too many armourers would have experienced a day like today. Then again, it was also a “**Day in the life of an Armourer**”.

Later, I was summoned to the “**Pilots Room**” to make a statement for the crash enquiry.

Half way between the Armament section and the Crew Room, I passed the C.O. of 77 Squadron. Thinking I was in a non-saluting area, I did not salute.

A BIG Mistake!!!..... He stopped me, and told me in no uncertain terms of my obligations.

He received the biggest and best salute I have ever given.....

by Errol O'Hara

