

# A CHANCE IN A MILLION

## AN INCIDENT FROM 40 YEARS AGO ILLUSTRATES THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING THE AUTHORITY TO ACT WHEN PLACED IN A POSITION OF RESPONSIBILITY.

**23 JANUARY 1979!** I would be involved in a momentous day with a complete stranger, a compatriot aviator. As with all momentous events, there was no inkling as to how the day would unfold.

Having returned from leave, I was scheduled for a check ride in a Huey. It was late in the afternoon when we finally got air borne and headed east out of Fairbairn Air Force Base, ACT. Ron Mitchell, the QFI checking me out was very experienced, a bloody good pilot and a nice all-round bloke. I was anticipating enjoying the check ride.

East of Fairbairn, the terrain runs from grazing plains to hilly scrub and mountainous rain forest. As one of our training areas, the terrain had lots of features that allowed Check Captains to challenge their charge. As the sortie progressed, we strayed further and further east until we left the training area, enjoying the evening light effects in the hilly and rough terrain. About an hour into the flight, one of the emergency frequencies came to life with transmissions that were not readily discernible.

After a short period of focused listening, we realised two Navy A4 Skyhawk pilots were quite intensely talking about an engine malfunction.

Not long after, the discussion turned to a contemplated ejection which, further seconds later, turned into a statement of "Ejecting" at about an altitude of 15,000ft. We then heard the remaining Skyhawk transmit a mayday and a position report to a ground-based station beyond our radio reception.

There was a flurry of activity in our cockpit. While one of us plotted the position of the ejection on our maps, the other tried on UHF, VHF and HF to contact the other Skyhawk and then one agency or another, without success. Strangely though, after plotting the A4 ejection position, we appeared to be very close.

All of a sudden, we heard the pilots Personal Locator Beacon (PLB). We thought maybe five to 10 minutes before he hit the ground; hope he does not land on top of us. We headed in a direction we thought might be about right, hoping to hear the signal get louder and were rewarded. Meanwhile further attempts to contact the other Skyhawk proved fruitless.

The terrain we were headed into while homing on the signal became steeper and rougher, and night was closing in. We were below a cloud base in a valley system. The cloud was close

to settling on the hills above us, with a little mist in the air. Yes, we were worried. As the PLB signal got louder, we were discussing whether or not we had time to finalise before cloud and lack of light made flying conditions too hazardous. It was also going to be a very cold night in the mountains and a long way through tortuous terrain to any "civilization" for the downed pilot.

We both thought at this stage, the pilot had no idea that underneath him was a chopper with two blokes frantically trying to meet him when he hit the ground. I was trying to imagine how he felt.

Quote from Col Tomlinson, A4 pilot:

*Next came the great opening shock of the chute. The ballistic spreader, now incorporated in the seat, threw the risers out instantaneously and I slowed from 260 KTS to zero in approximately half a second. My whole body felt like a piece of rag being whiplashed as the opening shock rippled through it. I felt dazed for a few seconds and a feeling of nausea developed in my stomach. I checked my limbs for injury and at that stage everything felt sore but I could move okay. Reaching up and pulling down on the right hand risers I stabilised underneath the chute and gave the 'boss' a thumbs-up as he flew by.*

*I could taste blood and hoped no internal damage had been done. This increased the sick feeling that had developed and taking a puff of emergency oxygen, I noticed it was not flowing. A feeling of loneliness hit as I descended towards the mass of white undercast cloud with the wind occasionally whistling through the risers and canopy. The feeling was very eerie, especially as I also had a sensation of going up and down in updraughts when all I wanted to do was get down.*

*The RSSK8 (dinghy and survival pack) was becoming increasingly uncomfortable and I released one side of it to relieve the pressure; also hoping that after descending through the cloud*



*I would come out into a clear area and be able to release the pack just above the ground so it would not injure me on landing. Not long afterwards the tops of the clouds (approximately 7,000 feet) started to engulf me and the white mass that took away the bright sunshine and blue sky felt very pleasant for some reason. There was no sensation of movement whatsoever until small glimpses of the ground appeared below.*

*I broke out of the cloud about 500 feet above heavily timbered rain forest country and taking a quick look around all I could see was the surrounding hills covered in cloud and drizzle."*

The PLB signal got louder as we headed up a valley. We were below the cloud and still well clear of terrain. Then the valley forked markedly. It was a decision of right or left. If the decision was wrong, we would have insufficient light remaining to turn around and try the other way. We veered left and the signal got louder.

Then there it was, a parachute suspended in a huge tree, surrounded by other huge trees, with this bloke standing nearby. Whoopie! We were now circling over the A4 pilot.

We discussed our lack of a crewie to work the winch. There was a flying order stating, for centre of gravity

reasons, there was to be no single pilot winching operation without the Commanding Officer's authority. Luckily, I was the CO. Ron was okay about operating the winch and would have to leave the cockpit, but then, of course, I was not yet re-rated: that was what our flight was about. I asked Ron had I passed the check ride? He signed me up on the spot. Now we were set for a winch.

Ron exited his seat for the rear cabin and I set up an approach to the hover over the survivor. Bit of adrenalin running. Important outcome, weather deteriorating, light fading.

Then Ron called that we were not equipped with a winch collar. He noticed the downed pilot was wearing an old-style Mae West life preserver designed to take a winch hook, but there was documentation strongly recommending against that despite years of previous use. Again, the CO role came into play.

Ron called winch hook going down. Quite quickly, it seemed, the pilot was hooked and coming up. Then out of the corner of my eye I saw Ron pulling him in through the door. Pretty good work.

Ron finally rejoined me in the front and I glanced around as we rolled into a climb to get the heck out of there. A young bloke was perched on the seat in the back with a big smile on his face. I thought "bloody good". What a coup for all of us in the military system.

Quote from Col Tomlinson:

*I reached down and with the aid of my legs was able to pull the RSSK8 back up as the trees now came rapidly towards me. It took some time to relocate the RSSK8 connections and while doing them up I noticed a small clear area of about 20 feet in diameter below. Attempting to steer into it by pulling on the rear risers I was only successful in slowing some of the drift over the ground and landed into the top of a 100 foot high tree on the edge of it. Crashing through the top of the tree, I hoped the chute would not tangle and hold me stranded 100 feet high. Luckily it didn't. I continued through the foliage, breaking off branches as I went. The next thought was 'will the chute hold out and not be ripped to shreds and I fall another 60 feet?'. Again luckily, the foliage broke my fall and I landed quite safely onto the rain forest floor.*

*I released the chute and RSSK8, activated the SARBE and unsuccessfully attempted to contact the 'boss'. I then calculated it would be at least 30 minutes before a helo would get to the area so I switched it off, looked around at the thick undergrowth that surrounded me and mentally prepared myself for a long wait before rescue. I decided I would re-activate the SARBE in 10 minutes in case there was anyone else in the area. I noticed a large fallen*



On one hand it was a 40 million dollar plane, on the other hand the spider was inside the cockpit.



*log protruding out of the undergrowth about 20 yards away in the clear area I had seen. Dragging the RSSK8 I repositioned myself on the log and took off my gear. Just as I was taking out the foliage penetration flares, I heard the faint sound of a helo approaching. I couldn't believe my ears, 'magic sound' resounding down the valley. You couldn't miss that Iroquois WOK WOK WOK.*

*"Switching the SARBE back on, I wondered how the hell they got there so quickly as I had only been on the ground for 10 minutes. I fired a pen gun flare, then another, and another. The sound continued to come closer.*

*"After the chute was sighted I was able to talk them into my position. I was on a log with very little tree clearance above and I could only see about 30m through the heavily timbered trees. It was drizzling and not a very pleasant place to stay for any length of time so I was very relieved to have the Iroquois hovering above. I was winched up into the helicopter through the foliage. It was a very welcome sight for me to see the crew!"*

We somehow managed to contact Air Traffic Control at Nowra Navy Base and headed toward it.

Suddenly, a voice came on the radio identifying as a Navy chopper with a doctor on board, requesting we land in the first clearing we could both identify and swap the downed plot to their chopper.

Ron and I glanced at each other, shook our heads and said we can land but let the doctor come to our helicopter. It was a sensible decision not to ask a pilot, possibly in shock following the ejection to walk to the other chopper. But the decision was also driven, a bit, by our unspoken thoughts, "bugger that". Nothing better than an Air Force helicopter delivering a downed Navy pilot right into the middle of a major Naval Base. Nothing like a bit of "competition". We landed at Nowra with the doctor on board. Not much fanfare: not much of anything as we settled in the lines.

We found accommodation which was readily supplied, but we were in our flying suits and had no other clothes with us. "Maybe we can find you a



**ABOVE** Col's parachute was recovered some time later and presented to him.

meal and you can eat out the back of the kitchen" – mess dress rules. My first thought was "Stick it". My second thought was "Stick It". We took a taxi into town in some borrowed clobber and found a restaurant. All's well that ends well.

I am in the habit of reflecting on notable events in my life. I know there were some hinge points in this rescue that were important to its effectiveness and positive outcomes.

Importantly, decisions that contravene standing orders designed to protect personnel and equipment in routine training operations can and were made tactically to prosecute a contingent mission. Similarly, the decision to deviate from an approved task to carry out a task very different from the original, as in this case, resolved a situation that could have ended in tragedy.

The A4 pilot was fortunate that, as

the Unit Commanding Officer, I was in a position to authorise deviation from promulgated orders. If any of the decisions taken during this contingency had to be referred to higher level or were subject to bureaucratic processes, the rescue would either have been abandoned leaving a person's life in jeopardy or completed with some trepidation as to disciplinary consequences. Latitude to take action contrary to preconceived direction, subject to rational consideration and sound judgement should be an inherent authority assigned with task responsibility.

The successful conclusion to this extemporaneous set of circumstances serves to illustrate the value of delegating authority commensurate with responsibility. I fear in today's society we are on a path of increasing delegated responsibility while withholding authority, but demanding

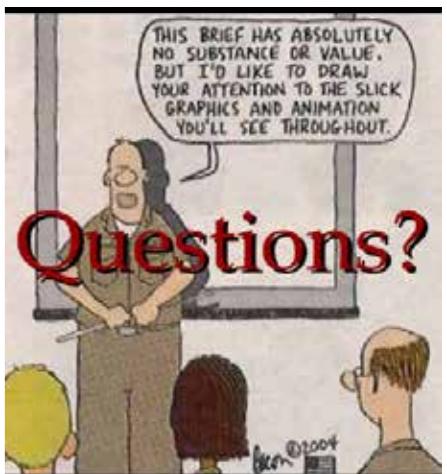
accountability. What's more, modern management doctrine does not appear to comprehend the difference between authority and responsibility despite significant education in management and leadership theory and practise.

I fear we have entered, in some ways, an age depicted in the cartoon to the right.

Often, senior managers tend to demand accountability without assigning any authority to make decisions and then treat failure with punitive action while everyday successes are largely ignored. Leaders/managers have become fearful of delegating authority because they themselves fear the consequences of bearing responsibility for their subordinates' decisions.

We seem to be in an age of arse protection.

This is a story from 40 years ago. I have had recent input from Ron



Mitchell, the Captain/QFI of the aircraft and I have managed to get input from Col Tomlinson, the Navy A4 pilot who ejected. So good to talk to them about this incident after all those years.

*Peter Ring,  
Principal, Lingk*