

1979: THREE LOSSES IN A YEAR

And so, 888, the trials aircraft and a good 'un, sank, fully serviceable, after two minutes. RIP 888.

The ship and embarked aircraft continued working up to a warmup exercise, before embarking on Exercise *Sea Eagle* in the cold and miserable Tasman Sea.

KEV FINAN'S EJECTION

During the ship's workup phase prior to participating in Exercise *Sea Eagle*, we sailed to our training area off the east coast in the Sydney area; I was tasked to lead a three-ship formation to conduct air-to-air tactics. My No 2 was our US Navy exchange pilot and 'Top Gun' graduate, Kev Finan, and my No 3 was Murray Coppins.

We had planned to complete our airborne manoeuvres and then return on board to undertake 'hot refuelling,' then taxi straight back on the catapult for a continuation of the airborne exercises.

Hot refuelling was conducted abeam the island area, clear of the landing area, and involved fuel being transferred via the refuelling probe while the engine was still running. It was a very efficient way of reducing the turnaround times.

I was the first to land and caught the 3 wire. I might point out that the target wire for the A-4 was No 4. This gave the best hook/ramp clearance without compromising the probability of a successful trap.

On this occasion, I had already commenced refuelling when Kev landed and caught No 4 wire. The next thing I heard was the LSO screaming out over the radio, 'EJECT, EJECT, EJECT!'

Naturally, this caught my immediate attention and although from the cockpit I could not see the aircraft disappear over the port side following the wire break, I did look up to see Kev and his ejection seat flying parallel to the ocean perhaps only a hundred or so feet above the water.

When flying we always wore a knee pad which held various briefing notes etc and I distinctly recall seeing these trailing behind Kev and his seat. With heart-in-mouth, I witnessed the seat release, the parachute bloom and, with perhaps only a couple of swings, Kev entering the sea. The plane guard (safety) helicopter, Pedro, was quickly on the scene and within a few minutes a drenched but otherwise uninjured Kev Finan USN was back on *Melbourne*.

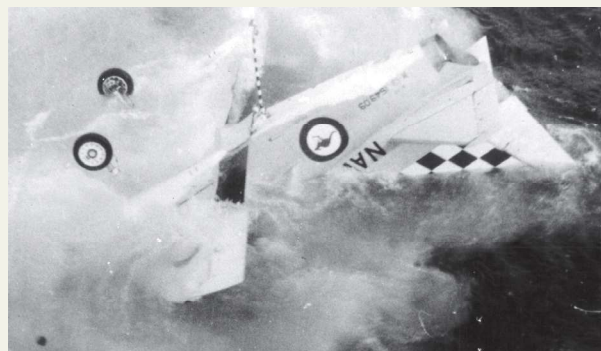
Coincidentally, during an on-deck delay earlier, Kev and I had gone through the same practice exercise to determine which handle we would 'pull' if we needed to eject in a hurry. While using the upper handle would provide more head protection and help keep the upper body straight, the lower handle was easier and quicker to grasp with one hand, with the other hand supporting the wrist.

Kev credited this practice with saving his life. My guess is that a mere tenth of a second delay in pulling that lower handle would have seen him bouncing across the ocean with little or no chance of survival.

Allen Clark



The moment of ejection for LCDR Kevin Finan USN. (RAN)



Skyhawk 888 disappears under the waves following Kevin Finan's ejection. (Seapower Centre)