



Martin-Baker

AVM Henry Alan Merriman, Ejectee #25

Back at Wattisham we continued with routine training which mostly involved practice interceptions of other aircraft at heights around 30,000 to 40,000 feet. The accident rate remained high, involving forced landings without power and several ejections. Of the 12 aircraft on the squadron we seldom had more than four serviceable for flying. For the last six months of 1955 I was fortunate not to have any serious problems with the aircraft until the end of January 1956.

Fighter pilots believe that unusual events occur in threes, and this certainly held true for me. After eight months of Hunter experience I was climbing away from Wattisham at 400 knots in a Mark 5 Hunter early in the morning and in a clear blue sky. When passing through 12,000 feet there was a massive explosion in the engine area. All the warning lights in the cockpit came on, the flight controls went into manual, and the airspeed dropped to zero. I realised it would be impossible

to make a successful landing in an attempt to save the aircraft, and the Martin Baker ejection seat was my last hope of survival. Fortunately the aircraft was over sparsely populated rural countryside, heading towards open ground. First, it was essential to jettison the hood, for at that time there was no interconnection between the hood and





the seat. So after lowering the seat and my helmet visor I pulled the jettison handle and was relieved that the hood left the aircraft cleanly. I felt and heard the rush of air before reaching up with both hands for the ejection seat blind handle which, when pulled down in front of the face, fired the seat.

There was no sensation of being shot out of the cockpit. It was the jerk of the opening of the parachute and the complete silence that assured me I had successfully escaped from the aircraft and I was out of the chaos there had been in the cockpit. Below me I could see the aircraft diving towards the ground and the ejection seat falling away while I was relaxed and enjoying the peace and quiet of my first experience of parachuting. I estimated I was about 10,000 feet above the ground and although there was no feeling of descending I calculated that on the basis of the elapsed time from jumping from a 10 feet high wall to the ground, the rate of the parachute descent would be about 1,000 feet per minute. Hence I would have about 10 minutes to pass before landing. The worrying question was where was that landing likely to be?

The clear visibility provided a grand panoramic view of the ground below which in any other circumstance would have been quite delightful. However, despite the open country aspect I was alarmed to see a steam train rushing along between Ipswich and Bury St Edmunds. In addition I spotted a line of high tension electricity pylons, almost certainly carrying some 33,000 volts on their wires.

I then recognised the small town of Stowmarket which at that time of the day had its main streets teeming with rush hour traffic. As I got closer to the ground, to my horror I realised I was drifting slowly towards the town. Frantically I tried to recall the crew-room pamphlets advising how to control the flight of a parachute. Was it 'pull down the harness strap in the direction you wish to travel'? I gave a mighty tug on the appropriate strap and immediately found myself swinging like a pendulum. Worse, a large portion of the parachute envelope was fluttering wildly. That really scared me.

I grudgingly accepted that my fate was out of my hands. With the rooftops and gardens now clearly visible I thought there was a good chance I would land on the grass tennis court of a large mansion. This thought was interrupted by a loud crash as I broke through the slated roof tiles of a two-storey terraced house on the edge of the town and the parachute drifted slowly in the light wind to drape down the front of the house. I frantically pushed the buckle to release the harness before the parachute pulled me over the edge with it.

Wedged among the rafters I felt reasonably safe and in no hurry to climb out onto the slates, fearing that I would slide down the roof and over the edge into the street



below, which by this time was full of local sightseers. One prominent member asked if I was alright, while another called out that he would fetch a ladder.

On arrival, the top of the ladder barely reached the gutter, and eventually a face appeared level with the gutter offering to help me get down. I admired his initiative but decided that the feasibility of successfully getting on to the ladder was very low. Fortunately, soon afterwards a fire service vehicle arrived with extension ladder systems, and I was assisted to the ground to the applause of the crowd watching.

The sole of my flying boots had taken the impact with the roof, leaving me with slight bruises on my shins as I broke through the tiles, luckily between rafters. It was sheer good fortune that I hit the roof between rafters. A landing directly on a rafter would not only have injured my legs but also have left me vulnerable to being pulled down the roof by the parachute and over the gutter into the street below with resulting serious injury.

Once safely on the road and after assuring everyone I was unharmed a car took me back to Wattisham where I was told that in the upstairs bedroom below my point of impact there had been a lady in bed suffering from influenza, and she had been alarmed to see my boots come through the bedroom ceiling. I did make a point of calling on her a week later to apologise. She took the whole episode quite calmly.

Once the news reached France this story stirred the imagination of the French press. Artists produced drawings of a dear old lady sitting up in bed while seeing my boots breaking through the ceiling. This was accompanied by their impressions of the thoughts she had when she saw not only my booted legs crashing through her bedroom ceiling but also a 'derriere masculin'. I have dined out on this ever since, and even appeared with a French press drawing on BBC 4 TV."