

# ESCAPE - OR FRY

(John Laming)



During the early 1960s I was the RAAF's Aero Club Liaison Officer, administering flying scholarships to Air Training Corps cadets around Australia. Selected cadets were trained to PPL standard by flying schools at RAAF expense. Mainly a public relations exercise, the spinoff was that some might make the RAAF their career. Some did, eventually reaching high rank. Others became general aviation pilots and eventually joined the airlines. Despite being a desk job, it was arguably the RAAF's best for a Flight Lieutenant!

Every now and then I would fly a Vampire from Laverton to Richmond or Edinburgh. There would be a leisurely lunch at the Officers' Mess and meet old friends, then a staff car would whisk me to Bankstown or Parafield where I would flight test ATC cadets in a Chipmunk or Cessna. After discussions with the local RAAF aero club liaison officer and flying school instructors, it was back to the Mess for dinner and a bed for the night, followed by an unhurried trip back home the next day.

A tough life, but bearable for someone supposedly deskbound.

The RAAF allocated me 50 hours a year on light aircraft for what they euphemistically termed "continuation training". In theory it was to be used to keep me current so I could test cadets effectively. I nursed these hours carefully, occasionally floating a little racket to my advantage. This involved flying a Cessna 172 from Moorabbin to the RAAF CFS at East Sale. Lined up on the tarmac were Dakotas, Wirraways, Winjeels and Vampires -- a smorgasbord of wonderful aircraft!

I'd arranged with the CFI, Squadron Leader Jim Wilson, to let me fly one of his Vampires after lunch. Jim understood the desperation of desk-bound pilots, it was common to have senior officers attached to CFS to undergo refresher flying after long spells behind the

mahogany bomber (RAAF cynicism for a big wooden desk). In return, I would check out his CFS instructors on the 172. Three quick circuits, including a simulated engine failure on takeoff, and I'd sign their log books. I wondered if DCA examiners would have approved my signing a civil registered aircraft to a RAAF pilot who did not hold a civilian licence. But I worked on the premise of what they did not know would not hurt me!

My Cessna chores behind me, I would don a parachute, strap into a single seat Vampire, and hack, flick and zoom around every fleecy cloud in the training area. After landing with the usual 10 minutes of fuel (the Vampire's endurance was barely an hour at low level), it was a quick cup of coffee in the flight hut over a pot-bellied stove, then back to Moorabbin at 90 knots. The way I saw it, an hour in a Vampire was worth three in a Cessna, anytime. And it didn't cost me a cent!

Each day as I drove to work at Victoria Barracks, the journey would be spent scheming and plotting how I could get away from the office. I was ably abetted by Flight Lieutenant Geoff (Slim) Talbot, who shared the car and worked in the office next to mine. Slim was a qualified test pilot on his first desk job, writing flight manuals. Once a week we would sneak out and go flying in a Chipmunk from Moorabbin. (Years later Slim became an Air Commodore and flew the F111, while I became a Boeing 737 pilot with Air Nauru).

While the RAAF refused to pay for my flying the dainty Debonair at the Royal Victorian Aero Club, the club made a good profit on my Tiger Moth flying. So I arranged to fly the Debonair and pay the difference out of my own pocket, pointing out to the CFI that, as I was responsible for allocating ATC cadets to his school, it would be a nice touch on his part to give me reduced rates on the Debonair. He got the message.

At Moorabbin, I saw a 1939 vintage Avro Anson of Flinders Island Airways and fell in love with its classic lines. It was used to fly newspapers to Hamilton. The pilot was Barry Allen, a tall young chap of my own age and the cockpit had glossy pictures from girlie magazines plastered on the overhead panels. Barry offered me the co-pilot's seat on one of his paper runs, my job being to wind the undercarriage up or down. This required 50 turns of a handle and was tiring - hence the offer of a ride. The nubles in the cockpit were well endowed, making it difficult to concentrate of my secondary duties of tuning and identifying the Morse code emanating from the ancient radio compass in the roof. These delightful distractions made it easy to dial the wrong ADF frequency.

In between running the ATC scheme and inventing reasons to get out of my gloomy office, I held the secondary appointment of Headquarters Support Command Flight Safety Officer. Each RAAF squadron had its own flight safety officer, so I had little to do except read flight safety magazines and unashamedly pinch other people's ideas on how to improve flight safety. Never an original thinker, I worked on the comfortable theory that someone was bound to have invented a brilliant idea before I did -- so why bother?

But bother I did, after reading a frightening article in a USAF magazine about a pilot who died in his F80 Shooting Star. Aborting his take-off after the engine ingested a flock of birds, the fighter went off the end of the runway and caught fire and the canopy jammed, trapping the pilot inside. Because the ejection seat was an early type unsuitable for ground operation, it would have been suicidal to use it. By the time rescue vehicles arrived, the pilot was dead.

Trapped in the cockpit with the aircraft on fire is every pilot's nightmare, so the USAF designed a special canopy breaker to be carried in case of such eventuality. It was actually

a solidly built knife with a heavy handle and hardened pointed steel blade and was now standard in many US military aircraft. At the time the RAAF were operating Sabres as well as Canberras, the Macchi was about to enter RAAF service, and the Mirage was already operational. Slim Talbot had in fact, done much of the Mirage test flying during its introduction.

I thought it would be a good idea to find out more so, magazine in hand, I approached my boss, Group Captain Ted Fyfe, the Senior Air Staff Officer at Victoria Barracks. I suggested we obtain drawings of the knife from the USAF and have one made up at Laverton. Ted was a brusque individual whose main interest in life was golf and getting out of the office to fly a Canberra. Our conversation lasted a scant two minutes and he grunted his approval for me to tackle the project. I liked his approach: forget the paperwork -- just get results.



Within weeks we had two prototype knives ready for testing. First I had to convince the brass at Department of Air in Canberra that the canopy break-out knives were a Good Thing. That done, someone had to decide which aircraft should have them. I decided to arrange for the knives to be tested on real aircraft and, working on the theory that a picture is worth a thousand words, the tests would be filmed. The Aircraft Research and Development Unit (ARDU) at Laverton had Sabres, Vampires and Macchis. These were among the types I envisaged should be equipped with the knives. However, canopies were expensive and there was no way that the CO of ARDU was going to allow me to smash one, just to test a knife. But as luck would have it, there were several canopies in store that had been damaged or badly scratched. They included one Sabre and one Vampire Mk 31 (single-seat) canopy.

The next problem was to find someone willing to risk flying shards while smashing his way out. I was happy to do the job myself, but being a coward who couldn't punch his way out of a paper bag, I felt the whole project could be jeopardised if my failure to break out was recorded on film. What I needed was a real tough bloke (RTB) with the strength of 10 good men -- if a RTB failed to break through the canopy, then the average fighter pilot would have no hope, even when charged with adrenalin. So we needed a strong knucklehead - and I knew just the right Knuck for the job.

Flight Lieutenant Peter Middleton, DFC, had flown Meteors during the Korean war and when I first met him in 1953 he was a Fighter Combat Instructor at No 2 OTU at Williamtown. Tall and strongly built, he had a degree in martial arts -- a Black Belt in Karate, I think -- not the sort of chap to upset. I'd already felt his ire some years earlier when learning to be a fighter pilot on Mustangs. I wasn't much good at dog fighting and Peter, then my flight commander, would ruthlessly criticise my lack of hack-flick-zoom spirit in mock air combat. Perhaps this was to be expected, considering I had only 210 hours on Wirraways and Tiger Moths when thrown in the deep end!

Middleton was now adjutant of Base Squadron at Laverton. Bored behind a desk, he jumped at the opportunity of some excitement other than strutting the parade ground with a ceremonial sword. And if Pete was unable to break out through a Sabre canopy, no one else could.



So the stage was set. Pete would dress the part with a Bone Dome, flying suit, gloves and the knife. The canopy would be locked with Pete at the controls and, on the order, would attempt to break his way out using the knife. The event would be recorded on film and the results sent to Department of Air. If all went as planned, money would be allotted for knives to be installed in various RAAF aircraft. Lives would be saved, and I would be a hero for thinking of the idea. I would, of course, conveniently forget the concept came from the USAF and that some hard working airman in a cold and draughty hangar actually fashioned the knife. Minor details!

The day dawned and Peter Middleton climbed a ladder to the cockpit of the Sabre. Once inside, he strapped in and closed the canopy. The airman from the RAAF School of Photography focussed his Leica and held up his sign for Take One. There could be no second chance if a stuff-up occurred -- condemned canopies were in short supply. Suddenly Middleton waved furiously, and wound open the canopy. He said he had a good idea. The camera man looked up, puzzled, his finger poised. Middleton called out to the waiting throng (all the airmen in the ARDU hangar had downed tools to watch) that before using the knife he would first try to karate his way out -- an event somewhat akin to those fellows who break bricks with one mighty blow of the hand. This was going to be interesting; the camera man re-focussed his lens.

With a fearsome shout, muffled by the closed canopy, Middleton lashed out with the side of his gloved hand. The onlookers watched, open mouthed. Then admiration turned to unrestrained laughter as Middleton swore a frightful oath, shaking his hand in agony as his blow bounced harmlessly off the canopy. His muffled curses were terrible to hear. So much for smashing a load of bricks at one blow! There was a short delay for smoko while a nurse treated poor Pete's badly bruised hand.

The show was soon back on. This time, Pete had the knife in his hand and looked mean.



Already embarrassed by his failure, he was not going under easily this time. At the sign of Go, the camera rolled, and Middleton attacked the canopy with the savagery of Ghengis Khan. Huge cracks appeared within seconds and after half a dozen more blows, Middleton had beaten through and heaved his way out of the splintered wreckage. I was delighted. One more canopy to go!

This time it was the Vampire with tough, double width glass which I thought would prove more difficult. Again, in front of the now admiring airmen, Pete was through the canopy in less than 35 seconds. In fact his knife blows were so effective that the canopy frame actually lifted off its rails. Applause -- another smoko, then everyone went back to work. Pete, still nursing a bruised hand, returned happily to his office and ceremonial sword.

After viewing the films, Department of Air approved the installation of canopy breaker knives in Sabres, Macchis, and Mirages. I don't recall if they were fitted to Vampires. (In later years I noticed the PC9 has the knife installed). But the senior officer responsible for bomber operations, refused to approve the knives in the Canberra. His reasoning was that its canopy was already fitted with explosive bolts and these could be triggered to shatter the glass. Although I knew nothing about the Canberra's electrical system, I felt that with failure of electrical power, perhaps the explosive bolts would not operate. In my view, the knife was cheap insurance. But in the event, superior rank and bureaucracy won the day.

There is a satisfying end to this story. Some months afterwards, a RAAF Sabre pilot took off from a base in Thailand and hit birds. The engine failed and he landed wheels up in a rice paddy. The Sabre caught fire and, unable to wind back the canopy, the pilot was trapped. He unclipped the knife and smashed his way out, escaping the flames. I would like to think he owes Pete and me a beer!