

Near Miss

by Bob Griffiths

I DID not like De Havilland Sea Venom night fighter at all, its handling characteristics were so different from the Hawker Seahawk which I loved flying, despite its one dangerous characteristic — it had a bad habit of blowing up. I lost a couple of good friends to this vice.

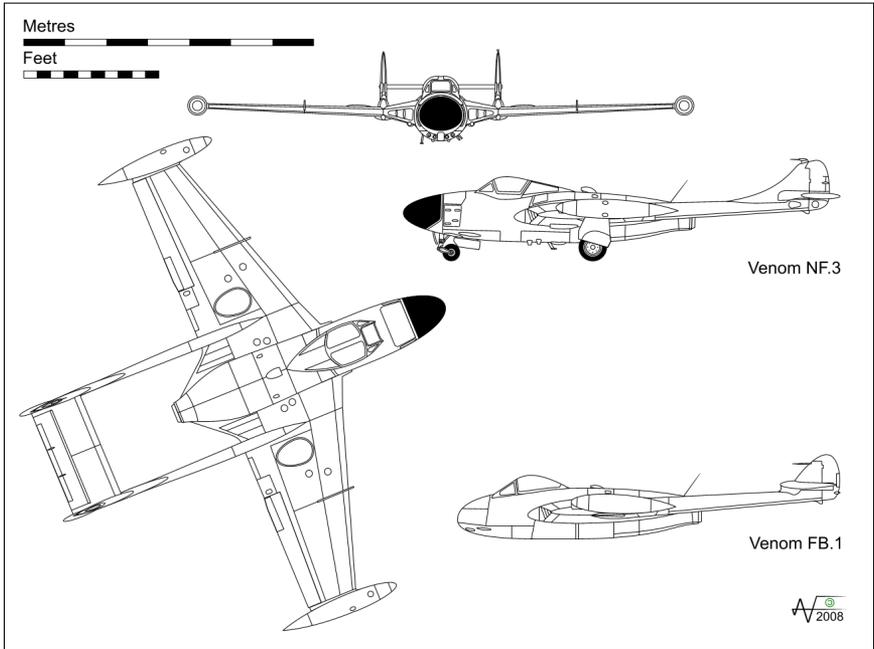
Its problem was eventually discovered to be the saddle tank, the middle one of the three fuel tanks that were set around the engine in the body of the aircraft. Engine heat weakened the casing of the tank allowing fuel to eventually escape and be sucked into the plenum chamber which takes outside air to areas in the engine to help the cooling process... I watched, in what seemed like slow motion, the movement of fuel in through the vents of my Commanding Officer's aircraft as he went down the booster, used to accelerate aircraft to flying speed, and crashed into the sea in a huge fireball.

When I was transferred to night fighters, life became quite interesting for several reasons; I was sent to St. David's in Wales for conversion to Gloucester Meteor Jets. Here I experienced yet another major and unique incident which is a story in its own right. From there I was seconded to Royal Air Force Station, North Luffenham in Lincolnshire, for the night fighter course which was great fun. Unfortunately, shortly before the end of the course, my observer failed to keep up with the course causing a few problems for himself and for me — getting used to a new observer¹

In due course we commenced familiarization work at RNAS Merryfield, the master field being near Yeovil. The Squadron was issued with the brand new Sea Venom mark 22 and all pilots were sent up, without observers, to find out how the machines behaved, always an occasion to 'play' to one's heart's content; certainly an opportunity not to be under-used, so I eventually went up to see how high it would go — a little over 53,000 feet on that occasion, and I decided to try a clean stall which happens when one slows down until the airflow will no longer support the plane and the nose falls and the aircraft will dive until it regains enough speed. An important facet of the Venom is that, being a twin-boom (two bodies between cockpit area and a cross-beam tail structure) aircraft, getting it to spin is very difficult, each boom fighting against the torque of the other in

¹ Peter, my failing observer was killed in an air crash less than a year later along with his pilot in a crash that may possibly have been due to the same problem that caused him to be back-termed on course.

a spin situation, which requires the aircraft to roll over and over when stalled; it takes full rudder and backward stick control (the way one steers the aircraft) movements to achieve spin and then not always successfully. This fact plays an important role in subsequent events. Using fingertip control to see how slow I could get at stall, I watched the Air Speed Indicator as it slowed past normal stall speed of around 112 knots - 108 - 104 and then all hell broke loose.



The machine flipped into the most vicious spin that I'd ever experienced making actions very difficult, but, instantly, I applied full forward stick and opposite rudder as the spin became more vicious until around 24,000 feet it started to ease, but as soon as it reached non-spin state at around 12,000 feet, it whipped over into an equally vicious spin in the opposite direction - maybe I was a fraction slow taking off the full rudder? Having taken the necessary actions, still spinning fiercely, I went into cloud somewhere around 6,000-8,000 feet, the 'Bang Seat' (ejector seat) moment, but I had a sudden, near-fatal thought, "Is it possible to recover a spin via instrument flying?" There was no way I would ever have been able to resist that challenge so I tried it, emerging from the cloud around 2,000 feet in a near vertical dive but no longer spinning. It is hard to describe that

visual picture; my favourite and most watched film in those days was called *The Sound Barrier* in which hero № 2 crashes having experienced the reverse-control effect whilst becoming the first man to go through the barrier. Watching the film view of the ground coming at one at great speed became reality and my terror was all-encompassing. I vaguely recall one foot on the instrument panel as I hauled back on the control stick as hard as I could while watching those trees hurtling towards me at around 400 knots. I know I've been blessed with the very best of good fortune in major matters throughout my life; the area was a very hilly one and I was heading into the valley at about the only angle where I had enough room to pull through completely. Even so I went through the top of the tree line but only hit fine branchlets, a few of which were still sticking to the aircraft when I landed.

However, this was far from the end of the story, naturally, my report left out the less acceptable 'facts' and concentrated on the 'important' bits like stall speed, spin etc. As we discussed the incident in the crew room, opinions varied widely but the official response was "Rubbish, stalling at 104? Impossible!", and "Venoms-do-not-spin-you-stupid-boy" attitudes. Nevertheless, all had to be investigated so one of my friends, Sam Salway was detailed to take the machine up and try it out. Sam was a very good pilot, one of the best and his subsequent report stated that, with exactly the same conditions, the aircraft had indeed tried to enter a sharp spin when he stalled at 108 knots! Because there was now certainly a problem of some sort, the Senior Pilot took it up, it stalled at 112 knots and the port wing dipped sharply but provided no problem in correcting. Finally, the C.O. Tried it, stalled at 116 knots and reported no problems at all and the aircraft was accepted for front-line service while I felt a bit of a burk.

This proved to be one of the main reasons why I have subsequently spent great time and effort at studying things in close detail and attempting always to 'see what I'm looking at' 'hear what I'm listening to', 'feel what I touch' etc.

The final curtain proved to be one of the most depressing moments of my life and caused me to go back and look closely at the events which showed clearly that speed was the major factor in aircraft behaviour in this particular case. Some months later, the pilot of that aircraft, while approaching carrier land-on brought his speed down too low, stalled and flipped, spinning into the round-down of the carrier killing himself and observer.