

# Being switched on



Name withheld by request

This incident occurred when I was a young squadron pilot with No. 2 (B) Squadron at RAAF Butterworth, Malaya (as it was then). We were flying Canberra Mk 20 bombers and were having problems with the 'down-and-locked' micro-switches for the undercarriage on the main wheels. The micro-switches occasionally failed, which

but in the meantime we had this known defect. The general consensus among the pilots – including the squadron QFI (squadron 'check captain') was to carry out a normal landing, even if the light claimed there was an error because it was a known defect. I

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meant the aircraft displayed a 'false' indication when the wheels were actually down and locked. Each wheel had a red and green light; there was no mechanical 'pop-up' pin on the wing or other indication to tell the pilot if the wheel was down or not. New reliable micro-switches had been ordered as replacements,

disagreed with this: 'If we do that, we may as well just select the gear lever down, wait for the noise to stop and land the aeroplane without even looking at the green lights, because that's essentially what we're doing. Anyway, if it happens to me, then I'll treat it as an actual unsafe gear indication and act accordingly.'

Well, it wasn't long before I had a chance to put my money where my mouth was. Two days later, I was programmed for a navigation exercise. My navigator and I took off from Butterworth, completed the exercise and returned to join downwind on runway 18 for the landing. On selecting gear down, you guessed it: nose wheel green, left main wheel green, right main wheel, red. 'Oh #%\$@' I said into the intercom. 'The right main wheel's indicating unsafe.'

'Ah,' said my navigator confidently. 'That'll be the micro-switch.' I paused then answered, 'No, Ted. It's NOT the micro-switch as far as we're concerned, it's the wheel. Anyway, that's how we're going to treat it.' [Pull quote] I informed the tower that I was going to fly past low level to have them take a look at the main wheels. 'Both main wheels appear to be down and locked,' they replied. Somehow I expected that.

'Well, I've got an unsafe right wheel indication and I'd like the emergency services alerted.'

**'Roger.'**

As I commenced a turn onto first crosswind I told the tower that we'd be jettisoning the navigator's hatch halfway down wind so they could subsequently recover it. Throughout all of this I felt more and more foreboding of what was to happen to me when I landed normally with a faulty micro-switch. I was going to be hung, drawn and quartered by the C.O.

We turned downwind and midway down I told Ted to jettison the hatch. BANG! Followed by an 'Oh \*#%\$!' from Ted. 'What happened?', I yelled into the intercom, with the cockpit now fully air-conditioned by the outside air. Ted didn't unfold his nav table out fully over his legs, with the result that his uncovered upper legs were now decorated with bits of wire from the explosive bolts and he suffered numerous minor lacerations. 'This is great', I thought to myself. 'My navigator's bleeding to death, the whole base is prepared for a major disaster, and all I've got is a faulty micro-switch'.

At about this stage, I got a message from my C.O through the tower saying, 'Don't do anything rash.' That made me even more worried.

I turned onto long final to see two fire trucks and the ambulance lined up along the parallel taxiway at the threshold for runway 18. Also, virtually everyone on the base was lined up on the hard standing to the west of the taxiway to see me land normally. At this stage I considered diverting to Bangkok and not coming back, but unfortunately, we didn't have enough gas. I was not a happy chappie. I landed on the left-hand side of the centreline as smoothly as I could in case the right main wheel collapsed. Nothing happened. Shortly afterwards, I was absolutely exhilarated to feel the aeroplane slowly swing to the right and the right hand wing begin to drop! Later, when I analysed this feeling, I found it quite weird, considering the situation I was in at that time! I gently applied a little left brake to try to keep the aircraft on the runway and stop the wing from dropping. The aircraft stopped on the right-hand side of the runway with the right wingtip very low. The entry hatch opened almost immediately and I was faced by an airman with eyes like saucers and a fire hose in his hand pointing directly at me! He was yelling to someone behind him. I ripped off my oxymask and yelled at him, 'Not here! Point it at the wheel, the WHEEL!' He disappeared, closely followed by Ted and myself.

The wheel was angled in about 30-40 degrees from the vertical and the wingtip was less than a foot off the ground over the grass. The problem had been caused by a metal 'geometric lock' breaking off on take-off. Part of it was subsequently found in the grass beside the runway. This lock ensured that when the wheels were selected down, the wheel strut was locked down slightly over-centre so that the wheel would stay locked down. As it was, the only thing keeping the wheel from collapsing was the hydraulic pressure in the accumulator. The micro-switch was telling the truth.

Someone in the flying game once said, 'There's no such thing as a false fire warning indication.' True enough. This could possibly be also said about the situation in which I found myself. The good news is I wasn't reprimanded. 🚩

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