

Is Your Life Worth \$80.00 A Year? Updated 1 Mar 2006

by Allen Silver

The phone rings or a potential customer comes into my shop. Once again I am asked the usual barrage of questions regarding the purchase or maintenance of an emergency parachute. Most people are eager to learn and ask very good questions. But rarely does a week go by that I don't hear the following:

“Do you have anything cheap? Fourteen hundred dollars is way too much. I'm never going to use the parachute anyway. Oh, yeah, did I mention, it must be cheap?”

“What do you mean you won't pack my parachute? It was my grandfather's. Can't you just wash the oil and grease off it? The UV damage doesn't look that bad, does it?”

“I'm 6'2” and weigh 220 pounds. My aircraft doesn't have room for a parachute. The military surplus chutes won't fit. What do you have that's lightweight, comfortable and small? Oh, yeah, it must be cheap.”

“But I just purchased the aircraft and the previous owner threw in the chute for \$50. I know he wasn't a parachute rigger, but he said it was okay. Now, you're telling me it only has about five years service life left and needs a lot of work to make it airworthy.”

Unfortunately, I hear these or similar scenarios far too often. Probably the most common excuse pilots use to avoid purchasing a state-of-the-art parachute is the cost. A new rig will run in the neighborhood of thirteen to fifteen hundred dollars. Yes, this is a major investment, but it is a direct investment in your life. Compared to the cost of most aircraft in which you will be using the parachute, the price is a drop in the bucket. Today's parachutes should last twenty years with proper care and maintenance. This works out to approximately \$80.00 per year. Even though the total sum is paid out initially, a pro-rated cost of \$80.00 per year is pretty cheap insurance. For many pilots that is not even the cost of an hour of flight time. Very few airplane parts can be purchased for eighty dollars but for that amount you can own one of the safest parachutes on the market. Your life is worth \$80.00 a year. You owe it to yourself and your loved ones to make it home for dinner.

No one ever intends to bail out of his or her aircraft and the huge majority of pilots never will. But you need to remember that someday you may have to use your parachute for real. That cheap, UV damaged, uncomfortable cushion may catastrophically fail. Is the satisfaction of knowing you saved a few hundred bucks on your parachute worth it?

The size of the parachute is another factor that affects many pilots. Unfortunately, the strongest, safest parachute for some, probably will not be the smallest. Comfort and size may have to be sacrificed somewhat in order to enhance your chances of survival in an emergency. Current, state-of-the-art parachutes usually give the average pilot a number of choices as to the style and size of the parachute while still maintaining a high level of safety.

Before you purchase a parachute, whether it's brand new or used, please find a parachute rigger that you trust to help you make this important decision. Education is the key to making an intelligent purchasing decision. I don't expect you to know everything about parachutes. That's my job. When you bought your aircraft or selected a mechanic, didn't you ask around and get expert advice? Only then did you consider spending your hard-earned money. Read some of my previously published articles in this magazine or pull up my website at www.pia.com/silver if you have access to the Internet. Call me or talk to your rigger, but communicate with someone who is knowledgeable about emergency parachutes. Ask questions until you are satisfied.

Many pilots today are stepping up to faster and faster aircraft. If you fall within the parameters of aircraft speed (usually up to 150 knots) and pilot weight (usually up to 220 - 254 pounds) at which most manufacturers rate their canopies, you will be fine. The problem arises when the speed or weight exceeds the maximums. There is a trade-off, but no testing has been done to determine, for instance, how fast a 130 pound pilot could safely deploy his parachute. My best advice is to discuss your personal situation with a rigger. In general, by purchasing one of the best parachute systems available, you will be giving yourself the best chance of a successful bailout.

Many companies in the parachute industry are currently developing and testing even stronger, lighter weight parachutes. However, as of this writing, no time frame as to when they will be on the market is available.

If you purchase one of the modern, higher speed, standard category parachutes on the market today with the advice of a competent rigger, chances are that parachute will be able to move from aircraft to aircraft with you. You run into trouble when trying to get by with something old and cheap that really doesn't fit you or the airplane. Often times over a period of years, you may end up spending more money by changing parachutes several times.

Advice from me is free, please ask for it. If you can, attend a safety seminar on emergency procedures. During that time discuss the various equipment options available. If there has never been a safety seminar in your area, arrange for one. I do several seminars each year and would love to do more. The only cost to your organization is to cover my travel expenses. Many groups offer the safety talk in conjunction with their monthly meeting.

There are no short cuts or substitutes for purchasing a safe, reliable parachute that will save your life. Unfortunately, when it comes to parachutes, the old axioms ring true

- “if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is” and “you get what you pay for.” You need to decide that your life is worth \$80.00 a year. You need to learn the emergency procedures that are proven effective and practice them over and over. Then you will have every opportunity to survive an emergency bailout. Hopefully, I have given you some information to live by.

Please do not hesitate to contact me at: 510-785-7070 Monday thru Thursday 8:30am – 5pm (pst) or go online and contact me at my website: www.SilverParachutes.com or email me at: Allen@SilverParachutes.com

Thank you,
Allen