



Bailing Out Over Water

What to do

There has been some discussion on the ACRO Exploder about water landings and which way to face with your parachute if landing in the water is inevitable.

Let's not get the horse before the cart and worry about which way you should be facing when a water landing is imminent. It's a lot more complicated than that.

First let me tell you a little about my water jump experience. I have approximately 15 water jumps, three of which were about 3-5 miles offshore in the Pacific. I taught water jump egress to pilots as part of my Air Force job and touch upon it in every one of my bailout seminars.

If you're flying or practicing your routine over water and are not within gliding distance of shore, you need some form of flotation gear. The most important thing you need to remember is how to properly wear and use your flotation gear in case you

have to bail out over water.

By the way, if your wing comes off or you have other severe control problems, you are unlikely

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to be within gliding distance of shore. When I was in the Air Force pilots were taught to inflate their LPUs (life preserver underarm) anytime they were not sure a water landing was avoidable. At night they were taught to inflate them just in case they were near water. What appears to be a dark road below you — safety — could be a river. Always err on the side of caution. What I'm trying to stress is the importance of inflating your life preserver before you enter or think you'll enter the water. Trying to inflate it after you enter the water may be difficult or impossible, as you may be sinking all wrapped up in your parachute and its lines and you cannot find the pull tab or oral inflation tube. Your harness will have a tendency to shift, and you may not be able to find or reach the inflation handle(s).

I've had people say they would only inflate their life preserver just before they landed in the water so they didn't waste the inflation cartridge unnecessarily.

This is not the time to be cheap.

When it comes to preservers, I've used everything from the old Mae Wests to the Air Force LPUs and more modern preservers like Suspenders. They all work just fine when worn and used properly, but they must *never* be worn under the parachute straps. If inflated they can easily injure you or explode. If you have a parachute with a chest strap it must be fastened under your flotation device. Whatever system you wear, it must be able to inflate properly without being hindered by the parachute harness. Remember, it must be inflated prior to water entry.

Just as important as inflating your life preserver before entering the water is to *never* release any of your straps before you enter the water. Your depth perception over water can be limited if you have no references, like a boat, making it next to impossible to judge your height above the water. You may find out quickly that was not a good idea as you fall hundreds of feet.

Stay in your harness and do not loosen or release any of the straps. All modern harnesses are designed to get you out of them quickly. If you release the leg straps in the air, you will fall right out the bottom of your harness. Just loosening the leg straps will cause you, at the very least, to drop down and out of reach of the steering handles, and you could easily fall out of the back of the harness. This applies to both conventional and aerobatic harnesses. When I was in the military the harnesses were designed differently, and on some harnesses we were told to release the chest strap and possibly the leg straps on the way down. Don't listen to a retired pilot telling you how they did it in World War II. Modern harnesses are not designed that way. Don't release or loosen anything.

You may not be able to reach or inflate your life preserver or rubber ducky and steer your parachute.

Also, if you're landing in a lake or river or close to shore, even in the ocean, you must assume the water is shallow. Be prepared for landing with your feet and knees together to take up the shock of your landing just as you would on land.

Of all the landings I had in water, the canopy come down near me in only one. If you can determine the direction of the wind, I suggest facing into it so you're not landing face-first. Even if there is no wind, your parachute will probably not come down on top of you, but if it does, don't panic. Your inflated flotation device will keep your head out of the water, giving you plenty of time to find a seam in your parachute. By pulling it over your head, you can follow it until you come out at the skirt of your parachute where the lines are attached. If you find yourself at the small opening at the apex, either turn around and go the other way or continue down the other side of your parachute. It takes several minutes for your parachute to sink below the water and you should have plenty of time to get free. With your flotation gear inflated, this is not a problem, just a bit more difficult and scary.

Once free I suggest swimming away from your parachute to prevent becoming entangled. Often your parachute will stay afloat enough to give rescuers a large colorful object to help locate you. Stay near it, if possible. If for some reason you cannot get out of your harness, you could cut the parachute free from it if you have a small hook knife like the ones that come with Silver Parachute's SMAK PAK survival kits.

Speaking of survival kits, mine include at minimum a whistle,

fire starter (not too important in the water), and signal mirror. I also attach the hook knife to a 4-foot lanyard; if you drop it you'll be able to quickly recover it. If you could not get out of the harness you would be able to cut your parachute free from it. Once you're out of your harness you might then retrieve the survival kit and use the mirror to signal the boat or airplane looking for you. If you do, make sure you don't get tangled back up in the lines and canopy. They may be just below the surface waiting to snag you. Another option is to carry a hook knife and signal mirror on your person.

In about 75 percent of the water jumps I've made, a part of the parachute canopy stayed above the water and partially inflated in the wind. I'm not advocating this, but on several occasions, once I was free of the harness and determined there was no danger of getting tangled back up in it, I took hold of the harness with only my hands and let it pull me for a bit. If it's windy, skimming across the water can be interesting, but the drag forces could pull you under. In that case, just let go. This is another reason for getting out of your harness as quickly as possible. It's also not uncommon for the wind to blow toward shore. By holding on I figured I might get a free tow. However, don't count on this and instead err on the side of extreme caution. When in doubt, keep clear of your parachute. It does not need to become your burial shroud.

If you have further questions please do not hesitate to call or e-mail me. Please consider having me give your group a bailout seminar, during which I discuss water landings as part of my presentation. Until next time, keep your head above water and fly safely.

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