

True Underwater Egress Story

By Mark Batten

In March 1999 I was piloting a float-equipped C-185, carrying two scuba divers and gear. The divers were performing maintenance checks of mooring buoys at various isolated places in the Queen Charlotte Island. At about 2:30 pm we had just completed our second-last inspection of the buoys at a place called Murchison Island when we were involved in an accident.

The aircraft was just becoming airborne after a normal take-off run when it began to roll to the right. I was unable to counteract the roll, and the right wing tip struck the water, causing us to strike the water nose-first and eventually come to rest in an inverted floating position. I was amazed how quickly I found myself underwater struggling to escape. There was absolutely no time to snatch even a breath of air. The impact must have caved-in the windshield, allowing the cabin to fill rapidly with seawater, immersing our heads and upper bodies first as the plane settled onto its back. I was able to release my seat belt and shoulder harness, then the door latch without difficulty. However, it was some time (it seemed like forever) before the door would open and I was able to escape to the surface. Happily, both passengers appeared at the same time, and we climbed onto the float bottoms.

Both divers were wearing dry suits, so they were well protected from the very cold water.

Although I was out of the water, I quickly began to shiver in the cool air (5-8oC). We were too far from shore to attempt to swim, so we were forced to wait for about 45 minutes as we drifted toward a rocky beach. It became apparent, though, as we neared the beach, that the aircraft was in a gentle tidal current that would carry us out towards the Hecate Strait where our chances for survival would be very limited. Therefore, we decided to swim for the beach. Although only about 75m, it was the most difficult swim of my life because of the cold water. I was very fortunate to have two dry-suited companions because I doubt that I could have made it ashore without their help. One of them gave me his dry-suit liner to wear instead of my wet clothing, so I was spared the effects of hypothermia. Fortunately the weather remained clear and dry.

We were located at about 10:00 pm by a search and rescue (SAR) aircraft. They were able to detect the flash from a waterproof camera that we had recovered from the plane. Incredibly, it floated to the surface after we had climbed onto the floats, and it proved to be our salvation.

I have some reflections upon my experience that I hope could prevent other seaplane pilots from having a similar adventure. Although the aircraft was never recovered for mechanical investigation, I think the likely reason for the unexpected roll into the water was a strong gust of wind. What seemed like a routine takeoff surprised me by ending in an inverted landing. We

are reminded that one of the most critical phases of flight is during takeoff, and you can never be too attentive to factors influencing your aircraft during this period.

I'm convinced that the use of my shoulder harness prevented my demise. My right shoulder was dislocated by transfer of impact forces through the throttle control. Had I not been wearing the harness, I would certainly have struck the panel head-first, been knocked unconscious and drowned.

A quick-release door jettison would have been useful. The time required for the water pressure to equalize in the cabin seemed interminable, and we were fortunate that the doors were not jammed by the crash.

The appearance of the waterproof camera was pure luck. I would not fly a seaplane again without carrying certain items on my person. They would include a small waterproof flashlight and lighter at minimum. Trying to swim back into the cabin to retrieve items would have been suicide.

I'm not sure whether a lifejacket would have helped or hindered exiting the cabin. It certainly would have helped during the swim ashore. Perhaps an inflatable, fishing-type vest would be a viable alternative for float pilots.

An accurate flight plan in such a sparsely settled area is critical to successful SAR operation. If you go down, stay put and try to make yourself as conspicuous as possible. Luckily, we were spared a cold night in the bush, but we were prepared had we not been located at night.

If possible, get yourself some underwater egress simulation time. It is remarkable how difficult simple maneuvers like opening doors can be when you're inverted and underwater!

We would like to thank Mark Batten for allowing us to print his story so that others may learn from his experience.