

How to escape a sinking airplane...well at least how to train for it

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“You want me to do what?! You want me to purposely train on how to escape from an aircraft that has gone down in the water? Why, we live in the prairies!” That was my initial response. To be honest, I never thought of egress training. That was something only float people had to worry about. I am not a float guy.....at least not yet.

But as my pilot friend very astutely put it, “you know they just put in a big pond at the end of Runway 35 at CYBW for the new golf course right?”. Have to admit, he had me there and he was 100% correct. Aircraft can land on the water, even if they were never intended to do so. It dawned on me that I would be flying over three (3) Great Lakes in two days in the coming week, but that is for another article.

I have always liked the water. We grew up with a pool in our backyard, spent time at the lake in the summers, waterski, boat, etc. I tend to think of myself as strong swimmer and can tread water with the best of them. Considering I might have to put an airplane down in the water went against every instinct and pulled terribly on my pilot ego. I was about to have three (3) very humbling experiences in a Winnipeg pool!

With plans to take a float rating in 2019, I was encouraged to take an egress course. Since I am a big fan of training to keep myself alive, and my limited knowledge of float planes and the added risk of flying them, I made plans to attend Aviation Egress Systems (AES) course in Winnipeg last week.

The course is put on by Patti and Bryan Webster. Most pilots and COPA readers will be familiar with Bryan, he is widely known as “Bry, the Dunking Guy”. A wealth of knowledge on the subject, Bryan developed the courses while flying Caravan’s from Vancouver to Victoria. His passion for the subject really stems from an incident he had in a Cessna 150 in 1978. Check it out, it was pretty scary.

The primary training for the AES program is done on the computer. With video instruction, scenario information and a quiz at the end of each chapter, the first step is to go through the online Dry Egress Training. This was an interesting lead into what would become a very interesting, and sinus clearing, experience in a pool later in the week.

I walked from the hotel in Winnipeg just to get some fresh air and to help clear my head. I had been told that the pool training was tough. Not so much physically, though you do get a lot of water up your nose, but mentally. It was designed to take a pilot or passenger outside their comfort zone and in-bed the skills they would need to save their lives in the event of a catastrophe.

There were 12 students in the boardroom all together. Three from a well-known regulatory authority, three who were passengers only but doing work from aircraft for the government, three pilots from a float operation and two private pilots. The last member of our group was a helicopter pilot. There were two females and ten males. The first thing you notice is how diverse the group is. They have varying backgrounds, roles and experience in aviation. It was great to have different perspectives and lots of good-natured ribbing, especially at the expense of the helicopter pilot and the TC folks. They took it all in stride and we had a very good time.

After some classroom instruction and review of the online material, we were told to report to the pool side to begin the real training. It should be noted that you are encouraged to conduct the training in the clothing you normally fly in. Since I have never flown a plane in just a speedo, mostly because my passengers would be airsick on the tarmac, it was jeans and a t-shirt for me. I even wore shoes.

The first section is to do some work with the windows and “chair” on land. This gives the student a chance to familiarize themselves with the equipment and the mechanisms. All this without the added stress of being in the water. Everyone had a good opportunity to work with the items. I thought I had it pegged, but that was all going to change drastically. Here come the humbling experiences.

The first in pool experience was to work on donning and inflating a life vest. Not super complicated, also not super easy as they will keep you afloat, but do it by attempting to pop your head off your shoulders. We conducted some group swimming drills (with a bit of a race thrown in to amuse the aqua-cisers in the next lane over) and finished up with work on entering a life raft and helping others do the same. All a lot of fun and a good team experience.

The next item of business was to attempt to swim up to, unlatch and swim through two "Cessna" windows. This is in the shallow end and should have been simple, but the windows are turned, you have your eyes closed and a man of my "girth" has a mental block that tells him it is much smaller an opening than you think. It was much harder than it looked. Humbling experience # 1.

Following this, Patti took a group to the fuselage trainer and Bryan took a group to the "chair". Each of these pieces of equipment were designed to simulate real aircraft.

In the case of the fuselage trainer, it had multiple egress points utilizing different latches and simulated seat backs, to make swimming more challenging. It was a tough, but very realistic training and your hands really did become your eyes in that equipment. During a group exercise, we learned why you do not inflate your life vest before leaving the aircraft. With two of us pulling, we could not submerge one of the students enough to get out the cargo door with his life vest inflated. It should be noted, we only needed to pull him about 4 inches below the water, and we could not do it together. DO NOT inflate your vest inside the plane, you will NOT make it out. Humbling experience # 2.

The chair was the big one for us pilots. Could we escape using the 4 step method taught? Even knowing that Bryan and Patti take safety very seriously and we were never in any real peril, your mind will still cause you panic in the chair the first time. As you sinuses fill with water and the disorientation of being upside down hits, it becomes all a bit scary.

My first attempt was brutal. I was able to open the door but could not find my hold point and forgot all about my seatbelt release. Bryan had to bring me up for air coughing and sputtering. I was truly disgusted with my performance. Humbling experience # 3.

Bryan was quick to point out to everyone that what we are training for is so foreign, very few people are good at it their first time. I took my place in line at the side of the pool to allow my sinuses to drain and await my next turn. Bryan was right, the first run was tough for most and we were all surprised at the mental and effort. Bryan and Patti encourage the discussion about what happened, how you felt, your mental process amongst the students. This helped to put a lot of things in perspective and help with the learning process.

One thing that Bryan and Patti were quick to point out to all of us, was to trust that we could endure more than we thought we could and that with practice we would get better. They were absolutely correct. I was in the chair four (4) times. Each time getting better at the system they taught and each time gaining more confidence. After each “dunking”, Bryan discussed with us what happened, what we could do better, how we could improve. All of these lessons were there to save our lives.

After the time in the pool and some lively discussions after, back at the table, every person agreed that the training was tough but absolutely invaluable! Did we all think we are now the most safe water landing pilots and passengers ever, NO, we did not. Do we think there was a much better chance we would survive a water landing? YES we do.

I chatted with Bryan at the end of the day about my specific requirements in my Mooney. Being as that it only has one door, and that is on the opposite side of my fuselage, he gave me some great tips in the event of a water landing. The group parted ways, a little bit smarter, a little bit more confident and a whole lot wetter.

I learned a lot from the training provided by AES and encourage others to take this type of course. I also went straight to the local safety store and purchased a life vest. I would hate for Bryan and Patti’s teachings to go to waste, because I had forgotten to keep the correct equipment in the plane. Now I hope that I will never have to use this training in the real world.