

## TRAINING: DITCHING

Mark Smith  
ICS #13881

*Mark Smith is an instrument rated pilot fairly new to the Comanche Universe. He has owned his 1964 PA24-250 for about 18 months and expects to own it for many more years. If you have questions about his training, feel free to contact him at mark@winksmith.com. In addition you may contact Survival Systems, Inc. directly at www.survivalsystemsinc.com.*

Monday, July 9, 22:25:05 EDT 2001. As a pilot, I appreciate the edge that continuing education can afford me. Anyone can fly an airplane when everything is working perfectly, what makes flying an airplane different than driving a car is the pilots ability to handle a much larger variety of conditions. An understanding of why things are the way they are is important. When the opportunity arose for a trip to the Bahamas, it was something that I was very interested in. I had concerns about flying over so

much open water though. I had heard all kinds of anecdotal stories about what will and won't happen during ditching, but I wanted to know more than just anecdotal stories. I had heard of a ditching course browsing through a magazine several months before, so I figured it was a good time to give it a try. I registered myself with Survival Systems, Inc. in Groton, CT. Conveniently, the class facilities is located immediately across the street from the New London-Groton Municipal Airport (KGON). I didn't know much about the course, but I knew it was an entire day of training starting at 8 AM, it would involve classroom training, a large pool of water, and a large aircraft simulator. Being based in the Washington DC area, I realized it was going to be a multi-hour trip. I'm not normally a morning person and the amount of work sounded like more than I wanted to do starting from a morning before sunrise until after sunset, so I decided to arrive the evening before and stay overnight. I'm glad I did because I was treated to a most lovely sunset right after landing. As a side note, I can say, that my route from DC to CT was not a straight line! The IFR routing took me through PA and NY and I arrived at Groton from the north.

It was picturesque, but it did add quite a bit of time onto my trip. The authorities at Groton were pleasant and offered to ferry us back and forth from the hotel. In fact, a lineman pointed out to me that there was a self-service pump on the field that would save me a bit of money for my thirsty machine. The next day started off early. At 7:45 AM, I met the "old man", as he referred to himself, Vice President, General Manager of the Groton Training facilities, and Instructor Richard McGuiness. A retired Rhode Island police scuba diver, he had little experience with aircraft, but lots of experience in the water environment we would experience. The class consisted of four individuals, two corporate helicopter pilots, a G4 jockey, and myself. Being ex-military, the two helicopter pilots were experienced with ditching training already. The Navy, realizing that all things equal, training saves lives, has an excellent training curriculum for it's pilots. After introductions, we were taken for a tour of the facilities. This included a 100,000 gallon above ground pool and a pretty darn big trainer called METS (Modular Egress Training Simulator) suspended by a crane. The system mimics many different doors and egress paths just by



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attaching different doors to the frame. After the tour we went into the classroom portion of the training. Excellent written materials were distributed. An introduction to the course was given by way of a video. The video showed a man who could have used the training we were to start.

The first thing to note in the class is that the most dangerous part of the ditching is surviving the landing. The most numbers of deaths occur during ditchings due to crash injuries. Also, a life does not need to expire during the landing to cause death. Being knocked unconscious is a death sentence. So is having one, or both of your arms

broken. A broken arm will render it useless to do normally simple things such as opening a door or unclasp a seatbelt, both of which are almost certain death sentences in a sinking aircraft. Even after a successful ditching and emergency egress there were dangers. Cold can kill, but it takes longer. Even warm water will


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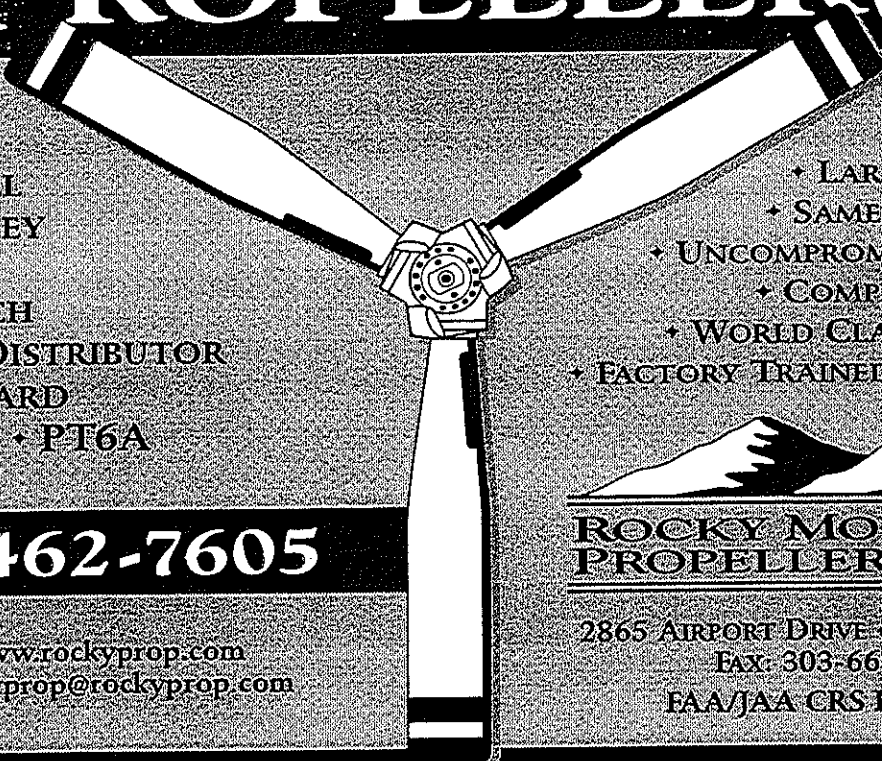
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eventually suck all the heat out of a person. Nothing would be worse than to survive the forces involved in a ditching, egress from a sinking aircraft, only to succumb from pneumonia a couple of days later in a hospital after breathing fuel contaminated water. For sustained amounts of time on the water the most important think, vitally so, seems to be to keep the survival mentality. The environment in a ditched aircraft is very different than what it normally is. There is no telling what the aircraft will do once it comes to rest on the water. Perhaps, it will snap a wing and roll over. As is the case in most singles, including my Comanche 250, there is a lot of weight on the nose and there is a distinct possibility of the aircraft pitching completely over tail towards the sky, nose down into the water. The water itself, will be filled with debris, toxic substances such as fuel and battery acid, and lots and lots of air bubbles, all making the water hard to see through if not completely opaque. Mr. McGuiness pointed out more than once that it would be hard to explain until we've seen it for ourselves. We will know a little more once we finally made our way to the simulator. That got my heart pumping! Until that time, we still had more information to cover. We covered the rules on how to properly restrain yourself during landing - remembering that survival depended upon living through the crash. We then covered some of the survival equipment that would usually be found on an aircraft traveling over the water. This included a life raft, life vests, water de-salinator, air pump, and the all important signaling mirror. We discussed the differences between life rafts - a 10-man raft is not all that big! (We fit five in our 10-man raft and it was a tight fit.) The main drive of the emergency egress training itself was that to successfully exit the aircraft would require that the person exiting would be required to maintain orientation with the aircraft not with the now

defunct horizon. The rationale is that the aircraft may be upside down, sideways, pitched up or down. Your ability to exit depends entirely upon being able to get to a door and exit. If the aircraft is upside down, right is left and left is right. Remembering to pull a door handle to the right doesn't work if everything is reversed. Even the ability to simply find the exit depends upon your orientation to the airframe. Movement around the cabin, if necessary, would not be accomplished by swimming. It would be accomplished by anchoring yourself with handholds and then shuffling your feet, repeating as necessary. To complicate matters, the world of water is different than that of land (or air) because gravity is competing with buoyancy. That pull towards the center of the earth we always feel is negated, perhaps entirely, by the your body and trapped air pockets on your clothing causing you to float the opposite way. That is why removing your seat belt is one of the last things an escapee would do. The last portion of the classroom activities covered what we would be going through after lunch. I was both concerned and relieved as Mr. McGuiness went through all the precautions Survival Systems made for the safety of its students. Relieved that they took reasonable precautions; concerned because there were risks in the training. We would be required to take five dunks into the water with

different orientations. We would not be told in advance what the orientation of the aircraft would be. The first would be an exit by the door closest to us. The next four exits would be combinations of exiting different doors and different locations throughout the METS. While we were preparing ourselves in the classroom portion of the training, the Survival Systems staff were preparing the METS for our particular needs. The two helicopter pilots would sit in the front with helicopter doors attached to their exit points. They had set up a three point buckle in my seat to mimic my Comanche. The G4 pilot sat near me with a four point harness. The last point in the classroom activity was a written exam to verify that the instructor had imparted all the information he was supposed to and that the students had hungrily sucked it up. After an hour lunch break, we came back for the pool training. I have to mention also that, since I had flown in the previous evening, I did not have a car. The friendly folks at Survival Systems lent me a car, albeit one which was a little tired, to go and get lunch. We arrived back at the facilities and put on our bathing suits followed by flight suits. The METS unit had been hoisted to right above the pool and conveniently next to the edge so we could walk right on board. We climbed on board. We reviewed procedures one last time and continued



along with the training. As we talked, the METS operator pressed the smoke button to show how hard it would be to see in an aircraft which was filled with smoke. The cabin filled with dense smoke such that we couldn't see anything. Luckily, this smoke was fresh peppermint scented and didn't indicate an in-air aircraft fire. It did prove the point though. Mr. McGuiness then indicated that we would first try a "controlled" crash into the water where the aircraft did not roll over. The main goal would be to exit quickly and deploy the life raft. The ideal scenario would be that no one even get wet. I grabbed the life raft because it was nearest me and handed it to the person seated near the opened emergency exit. He deployed it, handed me the painter line, and exited. While I held onto the line, everyone else exited, followed quickly by myself. We had gotten through our first ordeal relatively un-wet. That was unlikely to continue. The next exercise called for a full scale dunking. We climbed back in, reviewed the egress procedures one last time, made sure the divers were ready. Then Mr. McGuiness called out "ditching, ditching, ditching." I was prepared for the ditching holding onto my three point harness. The METS sunk into the water. As it sunk it started to roll to the right. It was eery watching the water fill up the cabin and there I was strapped into it. The METS was at a slight angle so I could see the water filling up the spaces and climbing up the chests of the people strapped into the craft at different rates. The entire cavity was filled in about 5 seconds or so. I could feel the buoyancy of my body strain against the straps as the METS continued to rotate. An approximate full 180's of rotation. I was upside down, strapped into the METS, in a pool of water with only the air that was in my lungs. As indicated by Mr. Guinness earlier I gave it a try with my eyes closed. By feel and memory, I reached down and opened the emergency door, got my outside

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hand on the door frame. With that hand anchoring me to the door frame, maintaining my orientation to the airframe, I then reached down with my inside hand and un-did my seat belt and snaked my arm through the webbing. With my outside arm I pulled myself out, realizing that as I did it, I was twisting around 180 degrees. With my eyes still closed I kicked for the surface. My body naturally wanted to go that way. Upon reaching the surface, I saw the METS completely underwater and several heads popping up on all sides of the craft. A quick swim (not so quick because of my now very wet jumpsuit) to the shallow area for our debriefing.

I suppose that turned out not to be too bad after all! The operator righted the METS unit and lifted it part way out of the water. We climbed into it, and then lifted it the rest of the way out. The unit was now ready for the next dunking. We did a total of five dunkings in this manner. In one case, I was in the helicopter cockpit, way in the front of the METS. This door operated very differently than the way my "normal" door did. In another case, I had quite a bit of troubles finding the release on my seatbelt. I knew I was in a very controlled environment and was relaxed because of it, but even so I thought that it wouldn't be hard to become frantic

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under slightly different circumstances. In yet another case, I had to eject my door then simulate an egress failure and climb through the underwater aircraft to an alternate exit. In this particular example, the METS had turned only 90 degrees. To perform the alternate door, exit I was required to shuffle downwards deeper into the water to reach the exit. The importance of maintaining orientation to the aircraft was really drove home. The last couple of egress' seemed easy in comparison to that first one. I started feeling so comfortable that I was would merely glide to the surface without even a kick. After our five mandatory egress's were over, some of us decided to continue with the egress training. The rest of us, myself included, decided to watch. As it turns out, it is painfully simple when you have a face mask on. The G4 pilot noted that he didn't have an exit available to him in the cockpit. His emergency egress path would take him to the cabin area and he wanted to try it in a trainer. After ditching, he climbed out of the cockpit and shuffled along to the back of the METS, popped the emergency door, exited, and then swam to the surface. Very impressive.

While on the last debriefing we started talking about an additional piece of emergency air breathing equipment. It's not very big, but it does allow the escapee an additional couple of breaths, perhaps making the difference between life and death. This tiny scuba tank is standard issue for the navy and the coast guard. We went one more time into the METS. I had a face mask and an emergency breathing device with me. The G4 pilot was going to try again with the device to compare against the previous exit. Equipped as I was, it was hard to imagine that the training that I had previously went through was anything other than child's play. It was like



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night and day. Even after the others had exited, I just sat there comfortable and relaxed. I decided right there to purchase this emergency device. It was hard enough getting myself out, but I did not intend to leave my aircraft without my passengers so I figured it was a good purchase. After the egress training we covered some survival training. That same pool was used to train us in the proper way of sealing up a life raft, climbing into one while in the water, helping others into the raft, righting the raft should it be deployed upside down, surviving with out a raft, inflating life preservers, and including the usage of a garbage bag to help keep body heat. We showered and

dressed (towels and shower rooms supplied) and met back in the classroom. We received our diplomas and wished each other well, hoping never to use our training, but satisfied that we would have a better chance should the worst happen. It was time to go home. The trip was a good one. I learned some new techniques and I had some fun along the way. The IFR trip home was routed even farther north. I climbed through a solid

overcast layer to the sparkling blue sky above. For almost the entire trip home a severe blanket of white stretched out below me. I know that the chances of ditching are very remote during my expected over water flight to the Bahamas, but I felt better finding out for myself what I could regarding the operation of my aircraft. As a goal of continuing flying education, who knows what will be next.



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**ARE YOU BELTED ?**

**ARE YOU BELTED FRONT AND REAR?**

FRONT SEAT SHOULDER HARNESSES CONTINUE TO BE AVAILABLE FOR ALL COMANCHE AIRCRAFT. REAR SEAT SHOULDER HARNESSES ARE NOW ALSO AVAILABLE FOR ALL COMANCHE A/C WITH TWO SIDE WINDOWS.

A FRESH SET OF BELTS AND SHOULDER HARNESSES GIVES YOUR CABIN A MODERN LOOK. IF YOU EVER NEED THEM, THE BENEFITS CAN BE DESCRIBED AS LIFESAVING.

THE FULLY STC'd INSTALLATION KITS ARE QUITE ECONOMICAL AND EASY TO INSTALL. IF YOU ALREADY INSTALLED THE FRONT SEAT HARNESSES, THE REAR SEATS REQUIRE LESS THAN HALF THE TIME AND DO NOT DISTURB THE HEADLINER.

A COLOR BROCHURE AND ORDER FORM ANSWERING ALL YOUR QUESTIONS IS AVAILABLE BY FAX REQUEST OR A PHONE CALL.

**FAX: (816) 431-3807 PHONE: (816) 210-4829**