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It is often said that being a pilot is less to do with manipulating the controls and more to do with the ability to address and prevent the probability of death. We master the muscle coordination needed to maneuver a helicopter early in our flying careers and although certain aspects of the skill may improve, wiggling the stick for most proves not to be too difficult an endeavor.

For the remaining portion of our flying careers we prepare for the worst-case scenario and educate ourselves in an attempt to eliminate the need for the preparation. Looking at the actions from an outside perspective it may seem almost paranoid or the symptoms of an over-compulsive disorder.

We learn, study and practice the emergency procedures for the aircraft we fly, and every year we are required to demonstrate our knowledge and ability level. Everything from the illumination of a FUEL light to the skill to land the helicopter after an engine failure is repeatedly learned and demonstrated.

We do this year after year knowing that throughout our entire career we may only experience 2 or 3 of these items. But here is the caveat, we do not know which ones they will be. To be unprepared for even the most minor of failures can have fatal consequences. So we learn, and we study, and we practice.

These tasks and responsibilities are not noticed by anyone in society except for those in the aviation community and provide little in the form of praise or glory. For the average person, a good or great pilot is someone who demonstrates the most dangerous and/or irresponsible actions. What we refer to as a "cowboy" is seen as a "maverick" level aviator to the average person. Of course the reality is that anyone who has such little regard for their and their passengers lives usually cares little for the more boring side of the vocation. In their own minds they are so skilled that nothing that occurs in the aircraft is beyond their ability level.

Luckily these types of individuals are a rarity and for the vast majority of the aviation community the importance and resolve to continually become more skilled at avoiding death is taken with a great amount of pride. But as the old saying goes, "If you want to make God laugh, tell him what you know". It is also important to ensure that what we know is accurate and that we have the ability levels we believe we have.

At the start of this decade I obtained a position on a US Navy contract which required yearly dunker training. I arrived at the Jacksonville Florida Naval Air Station to attend my initial training with the mindset that "This is going to be a cake walk". I was an avid swimmer, certified scuba diver and had a good amount of over-water time.

After the classroom portion of the training was finished we went to the pool area. My first realization that this was going to be different was when we started getting suited up in full flight gear - not getting undressed into bathing suits.

We were then taken to the dunker which was a large mock-up of a helicopter fuselage perched over the pool and suspended by wires. A Navy pilot and myself were seated up front with about eight other naval seamen buckled in the aft portion of the fuselage.

Hanging 20 feet over the pool I was still very confident that it was going to be very simple since this first dunk was going to be un-blindfolded. All I had to do was wait until the aircraft submerged and rolled upside down, then unbuckle and swim out the mock window to my right. It was at that point that the fuselage was released to the pool surface below and as the water started filling the cabin and quickly going above my head, my enthusiasm for this event quickly dissipated.

Once at the bottom of the pool and upside down I realized that I had lost complete sense of direction. Up was down, down was up, left was right and right was left. We were taught in ground school, prior to rolling over, to place a hand on the side of the seat that you wanted to exit from. I used my free hand to unbuckle my restraints and my first thought was that I must have grabbed the seat on the wrong side because I could swear that my hand was on the inboard side of the cabin.

After swimming around the cabin for a while I made it out my mock window and reached the surface of the pool hungrily gasping for air. It dawned on me at that point that if I had ditched a helicopter prior to this training there is very little chance that I would have made it out alive. I had been over-confident in both my knowledge and ability level with regard to ditching a helicopter in a water environment.

Perhaps realizing what you don't know is as important as learning what you do know.

Fly Safe. ■

GLEN WHITE
EDITOR