

By Mike MacDonald

At approximately 12:12 on April 18, I had another interesting aviation experience.

Seven miles offshore over the open waters of the Sea of Cortez near La Paz, Mexico, my passenger and I were searching for interesting aquatic beasts from 1,500 feet above the water when suddenly, our engine became dead quiet. My first instinct was to use my speed (120 kts) to maintain my altitude as I determined (in about 3 seconds), which direction to steer. I looked forward toward the Island of Cerralvo at my 11 o'clock, and to the shoreline of Punta Arena at my 9 o'clock, and I determined the shoreline of the mainland to be closer. We turned as efficiently as possible, 90° to the right, levelling off at our original 1,500' above the water, but now gliding a bit slower. I reached for the Fuel Tank Selector Switch, but noticed it was still on "Both", and as I barely touched it, the engine briefly started for about three seconds before shutting down again.

I continued to troubleshoot the issue. I gave the throttle a full range application and a shot of primer... all to no avail. The mixture was pushed in to "Full Rich", and the mags were cycled. Now at about 800' above the water, I informed my passenger that we were indeed going to land in the water, and she quickly pushed the distress button on the GPS Tracker while I pushed the Emergency Locator Transmitter (ELT) distress button, I gave a very brief "MAYDAY" call over the radio, knowing full well that we wouldn't be heard by tower, as we were low and on the other side of a mountain ridge, but it was worth the effort, just in case another airplane could relay the message.

Now at 800' above the water, I gave final instructions to my lovely wee passenger to tighten her seatbelt, open the airplane door "right now" for easy escape after ditching, then I reached behind to the back seat for a pillow, and she placed it in front of her face before impact.

In the final 200', I realized that my phone was sitting on my lap, recording the route we were taking on the Foreflight App, highly regarded by aviators for navigation, etc. (The app does not transmit, but was recording data for later). I grabbed my phone, and shoved it into a pocket on my right thigh a few seconds before impact.

With fully deployed flaps to minimize speed, I held off the stall until we were right at the height of the wave crests, when suddenly what seemed like a sea monster reaching up and grabbing us from underneath, we were violently thrown forward as we struck the water at 61 kts (112.97km/hr), as recorded by the Foreflight App still running on my phone.

Water rushed in rapidly as we hung upside down in our seats. Even though I drank a little sea water, I held my breath, unbuckled my harness, and somersaulted out of my seat, through the open door, and into the open sea. I turned around to see if my partner made it out, but she was trapped in a precarious position as the airplane was being thrashed around by the waves. As

I swam toward her, I reminded her to “UNBUCKLE, UNBUCKLE, UNBUCKLE~!”, and she too was released from the grip of the sinking aircraft.

Once we were in the water, it was obvious that the current was strong, and we needed to stay together. I pulled her around, away from the airplane, and let her know we were going to be ok. I told her to pull the tab to inflate her life vest, but she was having a difficult time trying to find it, as it was tucked up under the velcro folds which were keeping the wearable package together. I undid the velcro just enough, and pulled the tab for her, and watched with curiosity as the vest self-inflated.

I pulled down on my own tab, but it failed several times, forcing me to locate the red tube to inflate the vest with my own lung power. All those years of playing the bagpipes actually paid off~!

With our now inflated vests greatly improving our personal situations, I briefly let go of my partner, and turned toward the now nose-diving airplane about 10' away, to retrieve the life-raft stowed in the cargo section.

The cargo compartment hatch was just barely under water as I reached the airplane, but with the 8' swells, I couldn't manage to locate the latch as the airplane turned into a lawn dart, and disappeared beneath the surface. I swam back to my damsel in distress and held her for the duration of the ordeal.

For the first few minutes, there was debris scattered all around us. I started looking around for anything we might be able to find useful, or anything of value. I found my personal logbooks, my bag which formerly held the logbooks, and a 2-way marine radio. Although we were out of range, it would come in useful at a later time. Unfortunately, we had to watch a few items float away in the strong current, as they were headed further out to sea, and we could live without them. I lost my Passport, Pilot License, and the airplane's journey log.

Once we had a moment to take a breath (within the first 3 minutes of being wet), we opened up the personal GPS transmitter initially intended for SCUBA divers, but an application for anyone that might need help in the great outdoors.

I popped the cap off and lost the instructions to the sea as an antenna unfurled. I pushed a button and a blue light appeared showing that it was functioning. I saw a red button, and pushed that as well, and a red light flashed.

Within a minute or so, I felt my phone buzzing well below the water line. I very carefully pulled out the phone, making sure to not drop it into the abyss. Yes, the phone was ringing~! It was someone from our office~!

Although I couldn't hear over the noise of the ocean current, I said into the phone, “WE ARE IN THE WATER~! WE ARE IN THE WATER~! WE ARE 7 MILES EAST OF PUNTA ARENA, 10 MILES SOUTHEAST OF CERRALVO~!”

The lady on the phone very excitedly responded with, “I AM ALREADY ON THE PHONE WITH RESCUE...” Then my reception dropped the call as we drifted south, further and further away from our original position, but not any closer to the shoreline.

Although my little friend was scared for her life, she was an incredibly good companion in our time of distress. She eventually even laughed at a couple of my terrible "Dad Jokes" as we bobbed around for the next two hours. At one point, she asked if I thought we were going to be rescued. I said to her, "Every boat in the water, and every airplane in the sky is out there right now looking for us. It will be a couple hours, but I'm certain they will find us before dark".

She said, "Do you promise?"

Now, as a matter of principle, I never make promises to anyone other than, "Without guaranteeing an outcome, I can only promise that I will try my best".

But this time was different. I was confident that I was right. I said to her, "I promise to have you safely at home before dinnertime."

Suddenly, in front of my face I see a well manicured pinkie finger emerge from the depths, "Do you pinkie swear?"

I smiled, made full eye contact, and offered my pinkie finger to seal the contract. "I pinkie swear".

At the fifteen minute mark since splashdown, I realized how far we had drifted, and thought about the documentaries I had seen about survival, and thought I had better keep improving the situation whenever I saw an opportunity. By now, I had figured out the balance of the ultra awkward life vest, and realized that I could sort of push my partner through the water easier than dragging her through the water. I swam for about 30 minutes before I realized there really wasn't a point, due to the speed of the current and wind, but kept it going off and on, just to try to make sure I had a mental goal to aim for.

At the two hour mark, a large swell picked us up, and I could see quite far. It was the most beautiful sight of my trip to Mexico. There was a familiar ship about 2 miles away, slowly patrolling for survivors of a plane crash. My sighting immediately perked up my partner, and tears of joy streamed down her face. She got the 2 way marine radio, and made the call, and there was an immediate response from the ship, obviously in Spanish.

Directions were offered to the ship, "We are at your 9 o'clock, two miles", and we saw them turn toward us. As they got closer, the drift of the current and the large swells still making it impossible for them to see us yet, so more instructions were offered. "At your 1 o'clock, one mile".

Very soon after, we were finally spotted, and the giant menacing black and white vessel pulled abeam, and a crew member threw a life ring. We both grabbed the orange lifesaver, and were floated toward the stern of the luxury live-aboard SCUBA vessel. We were plucked out of the sea and onto the back deck by two strong young crewmen.

Once onboard, my partner was whisked away to get warm, dry clothes, and I chose to stay at the back of the vessel to vomit out my seawater. I fed the fish for about 10 minutes before going inside the cabin. Some of the guests onboard had a Canadian medical background, and offered me assistance, as they believed I was in shock. I assured them that I was simply trying to get rid of the

seawater in my gut, and that I tend to get seasick when I'm on a vessel rocking as violently as this one was. I immediately went back outside to vomit more green bile. I needed to stay outside for the time being.

Within what seemed to be about an hour, another fast moving vessel pulled up along side our floating hotel. It was the Mexican Marine Search & Rescue.

We were transferred to the Military speedboat, and were whisked away at 27 Kts through the choppy water. It was a bit of a rough ride for the next hour, but we were grateful that we were going to be back on land soon.

We arrived at the Marine Base in La Paz, and were greeted by a Military Doctor and Military Ambulance. We were given a triage and treatment for cuts and bruises right there on the dock, and were subsequently transported to the local hospital for a more thorough check.

We were given the all clear by doctors, and were released with pain meds for the cuts and contusions.

I headed back to the airport to pick up my car from the parking lot, but decided to go to the office where I file my flight plans every morning, just to see if anyone was still around. As I turned the corner, three faces lit up and arms were thrown into the air in victory~! The last they had heard was that we had gone down somewhere in the water, about 7 hours earlier. It's nice to know they remembered me, and cared.

Having gotten through to the shiny side of this ordeal, I have several people that need to be acknowledged. Unfortunately I don't have all their names yet, but I will make sure to reach out to each of them as soon as I can to thank them personally.

Overall, it was a highly coordinated effort to fish us out of the water in a relatively short amount of time. Thank you all for finding us before dark, and keeping us from reaching the Pacific Ocean~! lol