



# STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

*(Part I of this first person account of the first successful bailout from the pilot's compartment of an H-3 appeared in the July APPROACH. Here, the author continues his story and shares his survival and rescue experiences. — Ed.)*

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Continued:

ONCE clear of the helo, I couldn't see how far I was falling because my helmet visor was blurred with fuel. I waited about 3 seconds, then yanked the D-ring. The anticipated shock from the chute's opening came as expected. But less than a second later, there was another shock. At first, I didn't realize what had happened until I felt cool...then cold...and finally, wet. I was underwater.

Almost 3 years had gone by since my water survival

training at Pensacola, but as soon as I realized I was underwater, it seemed as if I was “flashing back” and performing in the training pool. There was no anxiety or panic. Conditioned responses to a water emergency learned in the Training Command made my actions almost involuntary.

My first desire was to get out of the chute. I undid the chest release and the left leg release without any problem. But my right leg release would not unlatch although I tried several times. Finally, I gave up because I seemed to be sinking deeper. I pulled the CO<sub>2</sub> releases on my lifevest and surfaced. (*The survivor says he was wearing gloves at the time of bailout, but they were gone when he was in the water. — Ed.*)

On the surface, I surveyed my situation. My left arm and leg seemed to be hopelessly tangled in shroudlines. The chute canopy was almost completely submerged at my feet. Foremost in my mind was the thought “I must get free of it.” I had heard so many sea stories about crewmen going down with their chutes. Again, I tried to undo the right leg quick release. This time I managed to release it, but it took both hands.

**Becomes Conscious of Pains.** Now I was becoming aware of pains. There was a burning throb in my right hip and pelvis and also a severe pain in my left knee. I tried moving my legs and arms and found that except for the pain, I could move them almost normally. Erroneously, I concluded that I did not have any broken bones. In reality, both my pelvis and leg were fractured.

I was kicking and cutting — trying to free my legs of the shroudlines — and getting apprehensive as to whether or not I would be able to free myself in time. By now, the canopy was completely submerged and sinking. I then decided that if I could just take my left boot off, I should be able to slide my leg out of the mess of shroudlines and be free. I tried to undo the boot, but I had modified my boots with those zippers that can be laced in place of shoelaces. The zipper would not operate because I could not get it flat enough to pull. I really wished for the original boots without zippers because even if the laces had become knotted, I could have used the shroudcutter to cut them.

**Aircraft Arrive.** Fixed-wing aircraft were soon on the scene — circling and searching the area — so I deployed dye marker and my radio. I had never used the survival radio in the water before. I assumed that it would float with the antenna upright out of the water, but it sank. I held it out of the water for a few seconds, but I needed both hands to get free of all the shroudlines. I let the radio go, hoping I would not cut its retaining line while cutting shroudlines.

I had cut all the shroudlines I could see, but something was still pulling me down. I reached down. To

my shock and amazement, I brought an armful of uncut shroudlines to the surface. Where did *they* come from? Well, it didn't take long to realize that after I had undone my parachute quick releases, I had completely forgotten to slide out of the parachute harness. *I was still in my parachute.* I slipped out of it and, with a few more slashes with the shroudcutter, completely freed myself from the chute and backstroked clear.

**Retrieves Survival Radio.** Next, I retrieved my radio and was very grateful that I had not cut its retaining line. I was fairly sure the aircraft overhead had spotted me, but I wanted to make sure with the radio. Not until I tried to transmit on the voice portion of the radio did I realize how weak I had become from exertion, pain, and swallowing large amounts of saltwater. I could barely say “Help me!” So, I put the radio on beacon and waited.

Five to 10 minutes later, a SAR H-3 approached from behind. It made a high pass over me. I gave a double hands-up sign which the helo pilot interpreted as an OK. In retrospect, I don't know exactly what I was trying to tell him except that I was, in fact, alive.

The SAR helo then came into a 20- to 30-foot hover over me and lowered the rescue hoist. The rotor wash from this lower-than-normal hover became so severe that I could not breathe without swallowing saltwater and spray. Cupping my hands over the bottom of my sun visor and trying to suck air in between my teeth didn't help. All I could do was hold my breath or choke on saltwater.

**Horsecollar Comes Undone.** The horsecollar had been maneuvered next to me. I was able to grab it. I was sidestroking into the horsecollar, planning to turn over and grab it in the proper fashion; but when I was only halfway in, in a stomach-down position, there was suddenly tension on the cable. I was pulled about waist



high out of the water when, for some unknown reason, one end of the horsecollar released and dropped me back into the water.

Now, I was worse off than before. When the horsecollar released, it shifted my neck flotation bladder around to the right side of my head. I had to struggle to keep my mouth above water.

The helo crew had to rerig the rescue hook. During that time, however, the helo still stayed in that lower-than-normal hover over me and continued to aggravate my breathing problem. With one arm, I was still holding the bottom of my sun visor to try to make a protected area to breathe in. With my other arm, I was struggling to keep my head above water.

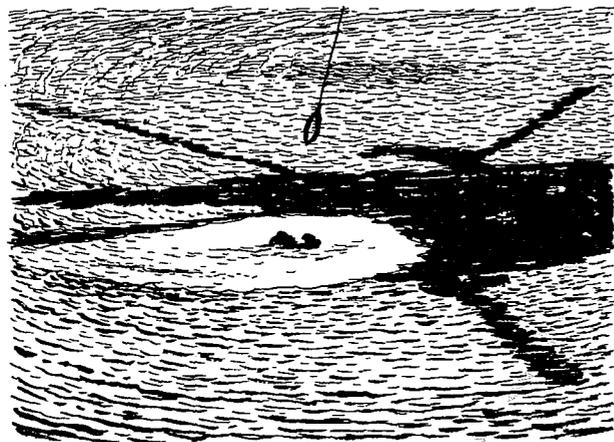
**Severe Rotor Wash.** I struggled and gasped so much that I tore the sun visor completely off my helmet. Now, my whole unprotected face was being hit by the severe rotor wash. All I could do was hold my breath and at the same time keep the broken portion of the sun visor in front of my face as best I could.

Finally, the helo did move off slightly, and I could breathe a little easier. I was able to throw my sun visor away and lower my clear visor. Now, I was very, very weak, and I knew that I was on the verge of drowning.

Unexpectedly, I heard a voice behind me. It was the rescue swimmer asking if I was all right. I could barely gurgle back, "My head, my head! Support my head! I can't breathe!"

**Hoisted to Helo.** The helo moved in again. The swimmer quickly secured me in the horsecollar, and I was lifted from the water. For the first time, I wondered if my injuries might be more serious than I had thought. Without the support of the water on my body, what had been throbbing pains became very sharp and severe.

While being raised to the helo door, I didn't even consider looking up – not because that is the proper procedure, but because I was so weak and in so much pain that I felt incapacitated. They brought me up to the



cargo door, turned me so I faced out, then pulled me in and lowered me into a sitting position. Then I *knew* something was wrong. The weight on my pelvis caused excruciating pain. I screamed involuntarily and rolled over on my side into a fetal position which helped reduce the pain.

**Thanksgiving Turkey Wishbone.** The helo crew wanted to move me out of the cargo door area because they had to pick up another survivor. Hands went around my shoulders, and at least one person grabbed each leg and lifted. Here I was with a fractured pelvis and a broken leg – although unknown at the time – and I was being handled like the wishbone from a Thanksgiving Day turkey. After I screamed again, they quickly put me down and finished moving me by dragging me by the shoulders.

What I remember most after this is the pain and the extreme cold. I was cold in the water, but not uncomfortable. But after being pulled from the water, I was the coldest I have ever been in my life. I shivered uncontrollably. My teeth were chattering so much I could barely communicate.

**Lessons Learned.** I learned many things from this accident – the most important is the necessity for being psychologically and physically prepared for any possibility that may occur while flying. Anything can happen to anyone, and the final responsibility for preparedness rests on the individual. When you find yourself in a water survival situation, you quickly learn what "being alive" means. Only *your* knowledge, *your* state of mind, and *your* equipment can help you remain alive.

Here are a few specific recommendations and thoughts for other pilots and crews:

- First, know your survival equipment, and don't modify any of it on your own. I know I'll never put zippers in my flight boots again.
- Second, refresher training is necessary, especially parachute training for helo drivers. This particular flight was only the second time I had worn a parachute in over a year. Helo pilots and crews just don't think about parachutes often enough.
- Third, for myself and other helo drivers, be aware of rotor wash. It can kill. I almost found out the hard way.
- Fourth, for helo crews, if you pick up a person, assume the worst. My injuries may not have been aggravated by the handling I received after being hoisted aboard the helo, but they easily could have been. Assume the worst, and do your best.
- Lastly, trust your training and equipment. When things go from bad to worse, these – and your will to survive – are all you can rely on.