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Steps to survival: From a smoke-filled cabin to an underwater experience...

"Brace. Brace. Brace." The co-pilot who just minutes before had rushed into the cabin to tell us there was a problem was now yelling on the PA system.

You could hear the tension in his voice.

In the cabin there was no need to tell us there was a problem. The hint was in the fact you couldn't see any of the other seven passengers through the smoke that was now billowing through the aircraft.

We braced. Those aft-facing, clutching the armrests and pushing back into the seat as instructed by our first officer; those facing us were – presumably – getting their heads down low between their knees with their hands tucked under their thighs.

The crunching sound of metal connecting with ground, then the disembodied voice over the PA said: "Stay seated. Stay put. Stay in your seats."

You've got to be kidding, I thought, but obeyed. "EZVictor" yelled the co-pilot "Evacuate, let's go. Out of the window. Step up. Leg. Body. Leg."

Being just the portlier side of trim and with legs shorter than I would have wanted, clambering through a Gulfstream IV window is a bit of a trial. But then fresh air.

We had survived – and now for the next disaster!

Emergencies

This is what the practical workshops of the Bombardier Safety Standdown are all about. Experiencing the emergencies and questioning actions to help coach all of us.

Our instructor turned on the co-pilot. "Did you check that the able-bodied passenger by the emergency exit knew how to open it? You must show them. And if there's smoke get them to touch it so they know what it feels like. The same goes for the main exits. You couldn't see a thing in there.

"And what about advising the passengers to breathe through some cloth?"

The co-pilot nodded. "Shouldn't we have crawled along the floor like they tell you to in hotel fires?" asks one fellow passenger. "No way," says the instructor. You are in a pressurized cabin – it won't help. Nor will breathing through the oxygen masks."

THIS IS THE DUNKER... DON'T PANIC!

Alan Peaford braces himself for a lesson in survival



...and finally the relief of a liferaft – all in a day's work on the Bombardier Safety Standdown.

We practise wheels-up landings and fast evacuation, we do a water evacuation. "More on that later," says our instructor gleefully. We fumble with lifejackets and we test the oxygen masks that suddenly fall on depressurization. Our co-pilot is told he would not have been any use because when the masks came down he walked back to the flightdeck. "You would never have made it. Grab one of the masks even if it is from a passenger. You know the emergency drills and will save lives. If the passenger collapses you can

revive them. If you collapse nobody knows what to do."

In the water, the training team from FACTS looks like the experienced firefighters and rescue experts that they are. The rest of us, a motley crew of pilots, operations staff and media look apprehensive... and cold.

This may be the Wichita Hyatt pool, but it seems to have been chilled for the occasion. "This is warm compared to ditching in the ocean or even a lake," we are told.

The focus of our attention is a bizarre contraption floating in the centre of the pool. "This is the dunker.

It lets you experience inversion in water. Don't panic. We are under the water and there to help. We haven't lost anybody". Then he pauses for effect. "Well, not today at any rate."

A Challenger pilot from Colorado offers to go first. He looks ex-military. Sharp eyes. Muscles. Fit. He pulls himself into the seat of the tiny cabin. "You could be in a light aircraft, a helicopter, even an automobile. Learning how to do this could save your life," says our instructor.

The Challenger pilot gives a thumbs-up. The dunker rocks gently on the swell and then

suddenly turns over. There is a frothing commotion in the water and our pilot emerges gasping for air having escaped through the floor. He is ashen. "That was harder than I thought," he says. "You are disoriented, the water is rushing up your nose. You know there is a window there but it is not where it was when you first get in."

Thanks for the advice, I thought.

It was worse than he said.

The rushing sound as the dunker tips, the water forcing itself at pressure. The instructor's last words: "Don't rush. Wait till it comes to a complete stop. Feel for the window then – and only then – undo the seatbelt and push out. Go too early and you will only float to the floor."

Welcome

Air has never felt so welcome. We do the exercise several times, wearing blacked out goggles with the instructors rocking the device, banging the metal sides and spraying the victim with cold water from a power hose. It never feels comfortable.

And then into the life rafts.

We learn about tying the raft to the aircraft before deploying it ("it can tie on to a seat belt clip or anything. Just make sure it is tied.") and look through the emergency supplies – a fishing line ("be careful of the hook, you don't want to puncture the raft"), a fresh water-maker: pump hard for 20 minutes and get half a pint of water. That could save your life. And the most important thing of all – seasickness tablets.

"No matter you don't normally get seasick, take them," says the instructor. "If one person gets seasick it will spread. If you are sick then you dehydrate and you lose the will to survive. Seasickness in this situation is a killer."

For many of us it is the first time we have inflated a lifejacket, have tried to clamber into a liferaft, have climbed out of an aircraft window, had worked out how to get to the "lifejacket that's under your seat".

We come away with drills, mnemonics and background notes and a belief that if the unlikely ever does happen then we are that little bit more prepared than we were before.