

Ditching

This is an interesting account of a ditching. Notice his remark about the rescue swimmer. Also notice his remark about the 'safety of a twin engine aircraft.'

9/9/20 2048Z (1548 local): A Be55 Baron "crashed into the water" 75 miles from Grand Isle, Louisiana. The U.S. Coast Guard rescued the two occupants of the Baron with "unknown" but minor injuries. The Baron was destroyed. N265Q (TE-106) was a 1966 C55 registered in Henderson, Nevada.

There was a cabin/baggage compartment fire in flight. The Airplane was destroyed. The pilot permits me to quote his account of his amazing story:

“We topped the aircraft off with fuel at Baytown airport (KHPY) on the east side of Houston, Texas. I departed VFR and picked up our IFR clearance from Houston Approach en-route, prior to reaching SBI (Sabine VOR). I was cleared as filed, SBI LLA LEV Q100 SRQ KSRQ. We leveled off at 11,000 ft. After crossing LEV, we received lost comms procedures from Houston Center, which I am quite familiar with as standard operating procedure on our altitude and routing, having flown this exact flight many times in the past, including in N265Q. In approximately the vicinity of REDFN intersection, I noticed a small amount of smoke in the cockpit. I quickly alerted ATC that we had a problem before shutting off the master (in hopes that I had an electrical short which would be resolved by doing so). The amount of smoke increased exponentially almost immediately. Not being able to see very much, I popped the cabin door open and also the pilot storm window. While having the door open sucked out most of the smoke and made it possible to breathe, it was still nearly impossible to see anything. **My passenger then yelled "Flames! Flames!" and just at that time I also noticed flames through the gap between the panel and glare shield.** At that point, I immediately pulled both engines to idle and pushed the nose over into a dive. I activated the aircraft's 406.1mhz beacon in the dive. By now, it was getting a bit toasty in the cockpit! It was nearly impossible to see out the windshield, so I flew the airplane by looking out the pilot storm window. Thankfully, it seemed that most of the smoke was being sucked out of the cabin door. I leveled the airplane about 100 ft above the water; saw a large yacht which I attempted to get as close as I could to without endangering, then touched down in the water. We skipped off the water, went about 30 ft in the air, and the next time we came down, the water grabbed us pretty hard. We stopped quickly enough that my prescription sunglasses were thrown off my face (they fit very tightly). I was able to keep the wings level, and we came to a stop in the same direction we were pointed in, right side up. I popped our seatbelts and we exited the aircraft. By the time we removed our seatbelts, the water inside the cabin was nearly up to the seats. We stepped out onto the wing and I grabbed our inflatable PFD's [Personal Floatation Devices] and ditch bag. By the time we had them inflated and around our necks, we were up to our necks in water. I estimate the aircraft fully sank within 2 minutes of touchdown.

I carry PFD's for every passenger. They were not really suitable for offshore use (I knew this when I purchased them, but went with this style due to size and ease of use. I would have loved to have offshore jackets, but it seems a bit ridiculous to carry them around in your airplane all the time.) We kept getting swamped with waves over our heads, even though the seas were relatively calm. I activated my SPOT upon entering the water (I have carried one with me since they were first introduced). The yacht never saw us. We waved and waved until they disappeared. We bobbed around in the Gulf for nearly 3 hours. A CBP fixed wing aircraft was doing a search pattern for 30 minutes before the USCG helicopter showed up. They both flew right over the top of us many times and never spotted us. The USCG chopper flew right over us about 6 times before they spotted us. This was where I started to become a bit worried. We could see them, but they could not see our heads in the water. We watched them fly over and waved at them, while I watched the sun setting. I knew if they didn't find us within 30 minutes, we would be staying the night out there and our odds for survival would drop drastically. I am not sure how cold the water was, but into the second hour, we were both cold and shivering. Finally they spotted us.

The USCG did an excellent job on the pickup. It was the swimmer's first water rescue. They were very professional. Later over a bite to eat, they told me that they had expected to find either nothing, or a couple of bodies. The commander attributed our survival to being 'extremely well prepared.' (I disagree with this a bit, more on that below.)

When I owned my Bonanza, I carried a life raft with me for these crossings. I fly regularly to Florida and Mexico across the Gulf during all times of year. I always carry a PFD for each passenger and a 'ditch' bag with water and cliff bars in it. My SPOT is always within reach. When I moved to a twin, after the first few overwater flights, I sold the life raft on eBay. I looked at it as unnecessarily taking up space. After all, I can lose an engine and still fly to my destination! That was a big mistake. I would have given my left nut to have a life raft out there. Not only would it have been much more comfortable, but it would have made us much easier to locate. Two heads bobbing around is tough to see, especially compared to a big colorful raft.

What I learned (or already knew):

- If you fly over water like I do, bring a raft. If you don't own one, borrow one.
- Carry a PFD for each passenger.
- Have a small ditch bag prepared with food and water.
- Carry a PLB or SPOT on your person.

My Baron was equipped with double shoulder harnesses. Without them, we probably would have been knocked out and drowned yesterday. At the very least, I would have serious facial lacerations and/or a broken nose. I will not get into an airplane without them. I do not care if it is for a quick ride around the pattern. It is not going to happen.

I consider myself having been (barely) adequately prepared for this. 'Well-prepared,' as the USCG Commander put it, to me would have meant being in a life raft.

Things in our favor were the relatively warm water temperature, the relatively calm sea state, the pretty good weather in the area, my emergency contacts knowing exactly what to tell the emergency responders. Also, having lived aboard and cruised my sailboat for 2.5 years and being a USCG licensed captain, I have had extensive water survival training. That definitely helped. Did my seaplane rating help? Probably not (even though my seaplane instructor would like to believe it did!)

I have no idea with certainty what caused the fire. The OAT was in the low 40s and I had turned on the heater approximately 5-10 minutes before the first smoke appeared. Turning it and the master off did not change the situation. It could have been many things, but I can only speculate....

Everyone tells me I am very lucky. I tell them that if I was at all lucky, my damn airplane wouldn't have caught fire.

Something else I have given some thought to ... If this would have happened just 4-5 flight hours earlier, I would not be writing this post. A few days before this flight, I spent an entire day bouncing around the southeast almost all IMC and every approach to minimums or near minimums. I am trying to keep a good attitude about the whole thing, but I would be a liar if I didn't admit that I am slightly shaken up over this ordeal.”

The pilot's skill in handling this emergency is matched only by his generosity in letting us learn from his experience. Speculation, which is likely all we'll ever have, is that the fire was electrical, the result of a fuel leak in the combustion heater in the nose, or ignition of flammable baggage or other materials by the cabin heater.