

# It's Called a 'Life' Jacket for a Reason

A ditching in 2013 illustrated how important life jacket wearing is, even if passing over water for a little while. And a could-have-ditched incident last year echoed that.

In August 2015, when the engine of ZK-RTE broke down five nautical miles off the Canterbury coast, the pilots executed a pretty flawless return to Christchurch International Airport.

Their emergency training kicked in, and while they were fully aware of the danger they were in, the atmosphere in the Piper Arrow cockpit was calm and measured.

The only hiccup in their studied calm was having to hastily don life jackets. While stowed in the aircraft, they had not been put on before the flight took off, despite the fact it was, for some time, over water.

Tension rose when the pilot-in-command, Craig Vause, had trouble getting his life jacket on, because it twisted as he tried to do so. He was, however, successful on a second attempt.

Steven Perreau, in the right seat, told *Vector* in November 2015 that not having those life jackets already on was a real mistake.

"It was a curious decision, given my practice of always doing so if I'm flying over water," Steven told us. "It was definitely not the right decision to make!"

A 2003 report for Transport Canada, *Survival in Cold Water*, says that operating close to shore or in a group, or with an emergency beacon, are not reasons to go without wearing a life jacket.

Death from cold shock could occur within 3 to 5 minutes, the report said.

A quality life jacket will keep its wearer buoyant for as long as needed. American research indicates that general aviation ditching survival rates could be as high as 90 per cent if the aircraft occupants are wearing life jackets.

Modern inflatable aviation life jackets are more comfortable and fit for purpose than the old, bulky ones. And the cost, relative to the cost of flying, is not high.

So there are two fewer reasons to resist wearing one.

Remember, however, that the life jacket must meet certain requirements. They can be found in Part 91, Appendix A14.

On 24 February 2013, a Robinson R44 helicopter ditched, fortunately, in only waist-deep water, about 80 metres off the shore of Lake Rotorua.

The subsequent Transport Accident Investigation Commission report said, "The helicopter was fitted with life

jackets for everyone on board, and these were stored underneath the seats. The life jackets were not used during the emergency as there was not enough time for the occupants to locate and don them."<sup>1</sup>

Rule 91.525 *Flights over water* states there should be one life jacket for each person on board a variety of aircraft in a variety of situations, and that those life jackets should be stowed in a "position that is readily accessible from the seat or berth occupied by the person". The pilot-in-command should brief passengers on the place the life jackets are stowed, as part of the standard passenger safety briefing.

But, as *Vector* reported exactly 13 years ago, "If the ditching preparations begin at a low altitude, the chances of the aircraft's occupants being able to get into a conventional airline-style life jacket in time are almost nil".

If the intention is to fly over water during any part of the journey, the CAA strongly recommends a pre-flight procedure should include all occupants donning a life jacket.

It could save lives. At the very least, it will save unnecessary angst.

Just ask Craig and Steven. ■

If the intention is to fly over water, even if briefly, the pre-flight procedure should include all occupants donning a life jacket.



<sup>1</sup> Inquiry AO-2013-002: Robinson R44, ZK-HAD, engine power loss and ditching, Lake Rotorua, 24 February 2013.