

Water survival training gives agents an opportunity to practice boarding a raft.



## All wet and upside down

Surviving at sea is a day in the pool.

“A helicopter crash in the drink is serious,” instructor Chad Warren told several students about to get wet. “Water fills in quickly and the aircraft sinks like a rock.”

They’re about to find out how.

Agents strap themselves into a seat mounted on a floating framework that resembles an aircraft cockpit. The device is flipped over, simulating an aircraft sinking inverted. While inverted, the agent must calmly reach for the mouthpiece on the survival jacket that’s connected to an air bottle, purge the water from the mouthpiece and breathe the compressed air. Then the agent unstraps from the seat, opens the door, swims from the dunker and surfaces.

To recognize up or down while inverted, agents learn to locate a reference point on the dunker. “Hang on to your reference point,” urged Warren. “Never let go.”

“It’s going to be uncomfortable,” he warned. “Water may be going into your nose, but at least you’ll be breathing.”

Before taking the dip, agents practiced using their lifesaving air bottles. About the size of an aerosol can, the air is packed at 3,000 pounds per square inch. Depending on how you breathe, the bottle can give a downed pilot anywhere from four to five minutes of time underwater.

Agents must dive underwater, fetch an air bottle placed on the bottom of the pool, purge the water from the mouthpiece and start breathing. “I don’t want to see your head above the surface until your bottle is empty,” said Warren. About half the group took multiple tries. A few came up coughing.

Water survival also covered how to stay warm, ways to produce fresh water and use a life raft.

“How can you stay afloat?” offered instructor Wade Plant. “Stuff plastic bottles into your flight suit or even blow air into your suit creating a bubble.” He explained how to use an array of survival gear from fishing line to flares to seasickness pills.

Seasickness pills are preventative. “Take them before you expect to get sick,” he said. “They don’t work after you get sick.”

## We’re stranded

Moving from wet to dry, the land survival scenario centered on an aircraft forced to make an emergency landing somewhere in the Arizona desert—in this case, some acreage with a pond and a few patches of woods. Agents were allowed to use the survival kits they were issued. About the size of a large wallet, the 98.6 survival kits, as they’re called, can fit into a flight suit pocket.

It’s amazing what can fit into that small pouch: a heavy-duty plastic shelter bag, cord with 200-pound strength, cutting tool, fire starter, whistle, light, mirror, water disinfection tablets, duct tape, lanyard, storage bag and an instruction booklet.

First task: signal the search teams. Lines and angles stand out against natural topography, instructor Ken Vitale pointed out. Fashioning a huge X or V using anything from sticks, stones and debris works well, he said.

The group fashioned a huge X, using strips of blue tarp held in place by pegs and cord. In an interesting procedure, they plucked grass, rolled it into small clumps and wrapped the corners and some edges of the tarp around the balls of turf. This formed a knob, called a button, providing a better grip for the cord.

Creating lines on the ground makes it easier for search teams to spot downed crews.

