



Ask Allen

A master rigger answers your questions about parachutes.

By Allen Silver, IAC 431160

Q: What does the word “hope” have to do with flying?

A: I just finished reading an article about “hope” in the February 2008 issue of *AOPA Pilot* magazine involving an accident, and I saw a direct correlation between that and a successful bailout. Hope is a wonderful word. I *hope* you have a wonderful marriage. I *hope* you have a wonderful life. The words *I hope* in aviation can be a double-edged sword, just like two other famous last words: Watch this! Like those two words, *I hope* are words you do not want to hear when the going gets tough.

I hope I have enough time and altitude to successfully bail out. No matter how many rabbit’s feet you may carry, nothing works better than proper planning. You need to know the flight characteristics of your aircraft so you can make quick and sound decisions. This is especially true in stressful situations, such as an emergency bailout.

Each aircraft comes with a pilot operating handbook that was based on countless hours of testing so you won’t have to say, “I hope this works.” What does all this have to do with the parachute you hope you never have to use? It’s called planning and preflighting your aircraft and parachute, and reviewing your emergency procedures with a dose of common sense. When I captained a parachute team, I realized that sometimes (mainly due to weather) a good jump was sometimes no jump. Sometimes a good flight is no flight, especially when you’re not feeling 100 percent and the chance of making poor choices and decisions increases dramatically. This is where the word “hope” is likely to enter your vocabulary. Attend a bailout seminar or at least have your parachute rigger go over everything with you. I would love to come to your area if you or your group has trouble finding someone qualified to give you instruction. You can also call me, and I will go over any concerns you may have.

Always go over your bailout procedures before and after each flight. Plan to have your parachute rigger run you through a drill, ending with you actually pulling the rip cord when your parachute is due for its next repack. I hope all this makes sense, and I sure hope you never have to deploy your parachute for real.

Q: Why am I having trouble finding someone to pack my 20-something-year-old parachute?

A: There are no hard and fast rules in the United States about packing your old parachute as there are in most European countries, Australia, and New Zealand. Those countries require the same U.S.-manufactured parachutes you’re using to be removed from service in fifteen years. Your parachute could have been hermetically sealed for fourteen years and eleven months in an airtight container, and by law you could only use it for one month. The reason is that your parachute, including the harness/container, is a petroleum-based product and will weaken and gradually deteriorate over time.

At present in the United States we have no such laws. About ten years ago I attended a meeting with most of the major manufacturers of pilot emergency parachutes, and most agreed that some time limit should be placed on equipment. The general opinion was that fifteen years was too short and twenty-five years too long. Ultimately, the manufacturers settled on twenty years. Most felt that almost all the problems with parachutes failing inspection over time due to sources such as ultraviolet ray exposure, constant use, and just lying around occurred after twenty-five years. I have to agree with this. Every parachute I have encountered that has failed nondestructive pull tests was over twenty-five years of age. Does this mean a newer parachute cannot fail? That almost always depends on how you use, abuse, and take care of your parachute. Of course, the liability issue comes into play, and not too many parachute riggers want to challenge the manufacturers’ recommendations even though it’s legal, but in my opinion you shouldn’t tempt fate.

With proper care you should be able to get a full twenty years of service out of your lifesaving piece of insurance. You don’t want to gamble on this. For peace of mind, and at today’s prices for a new parachute, that amounts to about ninety dollars worth of life insurance a year.