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Title: Senior Air Safety Investigator
Division: AS-ERA

Date: [3/25/2024]

Subject: [ERA24LA155 Knoxville, TN Pilot Statement]

Contact: [Michael Williams Pilot/Owner]

[Narrative of events sent to David Stamps / FAA on March 27th 2024.]

On March 25th, 2024 at approximately 6:45pm, I decided to take a flight in the Searey. Winds were calm, and visibility was good. As I had flown the day before, I was not planning on staying out long. My plan was to stay in the pattern at Downtown Island (DKX) and practice water and runway touch and goes for about 30 minutes until it started getting dark.

I arrived at the airport approximately 7pm and began the preflight. The plane had 14 gallons of premium unleaded fuel and was free of contamination. Oil level checked out normal, and the color within acceptable tolerances. Next oil change was due in less than 5 hours.

Around 7:20pm, I started the engine, taxied to runway 08 and performed an engine runup, without noticing any problems. This included running the engine to 3500 RPM, and checking the performance of each mag. I checked flight controls were free and correct and proceeded to wait another 2-3 minutes for the engine oil temperatures to hit 120 degrees Fahrenheit.

Around 7:25pm, I departed 08, announcing on CTAF that I was staying in the pattern. With the relatively light winds, the aircraft climbed very well and I estimated I was more than 100 feet off the ground before passing the first taxiway intersection.

At that moment, I would have normally put the gear up. But since I still had another 2000 feet of usable runway, I opted to leave it down for the moment in case of an engine failure.

I neglected putting it up as I passed the end of the runway.

I made a crosswind turn less than a ¼ mile from the end of the runway, followed by a downwind turn about ¼ mile north of the runway. Mid field, I announced on CTAF that I would be performing a water landing just west of the airport, in the pattern for runway 8. I used the downwind as an inspection pass to check for boats, debris, water conditions (noted as glassy). There was one boat travelling at a high rate of speed westbound next to the airport that was in my identified touchdown zone. I estimated that he would be clear by the time I touched down, and most of his wake would have dissipated.

About ¼ mile north of the James White Parkway bridge, I reduced airspeed to less than 80mph, set flaps and trim for landing and turned base. I announced on CTAF that I was turning base for runway 08 for a water landing west of the airport. I usually do this not only to alert other planes in the pattern, but as a separate check for myself to verify gear position.

Unfortunately, while I think I looked at the gear indicator, for some reason, I did not process that it was green for a runway landing. The landing gear was down and indicated as such and I did not notice. I think I was distracted or lost focus. I know I was watching water conditions / wake and rechecking my landing spot most of the time I was on base.

Turning final, this was my other place to re-verify gear position. Again, I missed it. I know that I re-checked flaps and trim and was concentrating on airspeed and pitch attitude. At that point, I became hyper focused on my landing area and maintaining optimal airspeed for a water touchdown. 55mph, letting it bleed down to 50mph on touchdown.

Suddenly, I remember the feeling of getting punched in the face - the next thing I felt was water passing my neck. I got a brief gulp of air and tried to assess what happened. As I regained my focus, I remembered to stick to the three H's in an emergency evacuation: Headset, Harness, Hatch. My headset was gone. Harness - I could not find my shoulder strap but seemed to be clear, I opened the lap belt. Hatch - I could not see as the plane had pitched down more than 45 degrees (my estimate) in the water. Up seemed to be in the luggage area - where my head now was. I struggled to find which way was out. It was dark, it was cold, and I did not get a good breath. I managed to find an air pocket at the roof of the baggage area and then

wiggled out. I believe I kicked windscreen, which had caved in. It could have been the instrument panel. My left leg was briefly stuck under something. I found the left canopy and pushed it back. I knew which way was out now and pushed my way out.

When I surfaced, the plane re-oriented to an upright, level pitch. The wings seemed to have buoyancy for the moment and that was supporting the plane.

Not long after, the bass boat I had seen turned around and picked me up. The owner and I secured a line to the plane and attempted to tow it to the shore. Unfortunately, there was too much drag to for it to move.

Knoxville Fire Department arrived with a fire boat a few minutes later. They too, tried to help tow it back to shore but the plane capsized as it got closer to shore.

KFD secured the aircraft to a shore and the scene was secured.

My physical injuries were limited to a large bruise on my shoulder from the shoulder belt and some scrapes and cuts on my legs, arms and face.

The following day, TowBoatUS was contracted to bring the plane back to the boatramp at DKX. This was completed around 5pm on March 26th.

After looking at the wreckage, the shoulder strap was still connected and latched. I believe that in the impact and sudden pitch down, my head was in the baggage area. That strap probably had shifted further down on my body. It might have been one of the factors that made it hard to get out. My estimate is the tensioner loosened afterward and I was able to slip / swim out from it. Both seats were still in place and their frames and the tubing they are attached to, undamaged.

I think I got complacent. My standard way of flying the Searey has always been keep the gear up unless you are about to put it on a runway or hard surface. When I took off, gained altitude early, and delayed (and later forgot) to put it up, I started the chain of failures. I hate to admit it, but sometimes a routine check turns into just going through the motions. I am fairly certain I looked at the gear indicator at least once on base. Either I did not connect mentally that I was doing a water landing and that was the wrong setting, or a looked and did not see it. My other point of failure was not noticing the gear was down - right outside the window next to me. I should have looked at it and realized it was mispositioned for that kind of landing.

This has turned into an expensive mistake for me. Financially, mentally and least of all physically. Although, many people do not survive this kind of mistake in a seaplane. I was seconds away from not being able to get out.

I consider myself lucky to have survive this and have the opportunity to learn from it in my flying - and everyday life... do not let yourself get complacent.