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By Senior Master Sgt. Paul Mann and Airman 1st Class Shannon Chace
168th Wing, Alaska Air National Guard

In the unlikely event of a water landing

EIELSON AIR FORCE BASE, Alaska — If you've ever flown on a commercial plane, you've probably heard the phrase "in the unlikely event of a water landing."

What happens if that really occurs? How do you survive in the water?

Rated air crew members of the Air National Guard continually train for that very situation. Every three years these Airmen put on their water wings and complete water survival refresher training.

Alaska's cold weather and long winters present challenges in scheduling and completing water survival training. On June 1, despite wind and rain, Airmen with the 168th Wing geared up and jumped off the dock at Chena Lakes Recreation Area outside Fairbanks, Alaska.

"Basically the training is designed to teach us how to survive water," said Col. Roger Ludwig, 168th Medical Group chief of aerospace medicine. "That would be as if we crashed or landed in or on the water, near the water, under the water; however we wind up, how do we get out and how do we as a group, not just as an individual, survive it?"

Ludwig joined the wing in 2015 after spending 17 years with the 142nd Medical Group, Oregon Air National Guard. He noted that the training approach for a cargo plane places emphasis on the group dynamic instead of the individual, what he had trained on while a member of the 142nd with the unit's F-15 Eagle.

"It's a little different take on how we do it with the group as a chain, a buddy system, and trying to make sure that everyone gets to the raft and how you survive together as a group," Ludwig said.

The chain is a technique where Airmen in the water wrap their legs around the waist of another and swim as a synchronized unit ensuring everyone stays together. The group stays linked together until they are able to climb aboard the auto-inflatable 20-person raft that is standard equipment on-board every KC-135R.

Reviewing the available resources and where they are located on the plane is an important part of the required training.

Chief of training with the 168th Operations Support Squadron, Capt. Brian Binkley, said, "All the equipment that we have available to us on the airplane is the equipment that we go over and get retrained on."

Although it is important to ensure Airmen remain familiar with the location and use of emergency equipment, training like this provides something even more important.

"Being involved in this sort of training -- like when we do the combat refresher survival training or any of the stuff that we do -- is all about building the bond of trust between the flyer and the flight doc," Ludwig said. "You are totally ineffective as a flight surgeon if you don't have the trust of your aircrew."

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Airmen with the 168th Wing, Alaska Air National Guard, prepare to jump off the dock for water survival training June 1, 2019, at Chena Lake Recreation Area, North Pole, Alaska. This required training ensures Airmen are familiar with available emergency equipment and protocol if an emergency water landing should occur. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Airman 1st Class Shannon Chace)



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Senior Master Sgt. Richard Smith and Capt. Derek Boschma, Airmen with the 168th Operations Group, Alaska Air National Guard, assist another Airman into the raft during water survival training June 1, 2019, at Chena Lake Recreation Area, North Pole, Alaska. This required training ensures Airmen are familiar with available emergency equipment and protocol if an emergency water landing should occur. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Airman 1st Class Shannon Chace)



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Staff Sgt. Brandy Wiener, an inflight refueling specialist with the 168th Air Refueling Squadron, Alaska Air National Guard, listens as Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) specialist Staff Sgt. Andrew Lawrence, gives aircrew members step by step instructions on the use of their survival equipment, Chena Lake Recreation Area, North Pole, Alaska, June 1, 2019. Wiener was among the dozen or so 168th Airmen who completed water survival training over the weekend. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Senior Master Sgt. Paul Mann)

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