

## Bogged plane at Lake Eyre a monument to bad day in the outback

By [Cherie von Hörchner](#)



**Photo:** Pilot David Geers' seaplane is written off after being cut loose from a rescue helicopter. (Image: David Geers)

A light plane that got bogged in Lake Eyre in South Australia will remain as an outback relic after a rescue attempt went spectacularly wrong.

The seaplane sunk in the mud after a forced landing three weeks ago, but attempts to rescue the passengers and crew and retrieve the seaplane itself, unfolded in such a comedy of misfortunes that the survivors are counting their blessings.

"We could have survived out there with some food and water," said David Geers, pilot of the doomed aircraft, who survived the five-hour ordeal with two of his passengers.

"But it was the water that was the concern, as we'd run out."

Mr Geers said the trouble began after he decided to do a precautionary landing in the lake to refuel due to changing weather conditions.

The top of the water had a beautiful crystallised surface... underneath that was this clay; wet, sticky mud, which trapped the plane. David Geers, pilot

"We were travelling to Innamincka from William Creek and we decided to track up to the top end of Lake Eyre, the northern end, and then follow the lake down to William Creek," he said.

"Our previous leg to Innamincka we had quite a strong head wind, unfortunately.

"We probably had enough fuel on board, but one of the other aircraft travelling with us had some fuel in containers, so we elected to do a precautionary landing in the lake.

"I touched down, and we probably rolled for about 70 to 80 metres on the surface without incident.

"But it was just when I pulled the power from the engine that it started to sink into the mud."

Mr Geers said the lake had appeared deceptively welcoming, the glittering surface of the shallow lake disguising the thick bog immediately below.

"We were very close to the middle of the lake," he said.

"The top of the water had a beautiful crystallised surface, which was about 10 millimetres thick. Underneath that was this clay; wet, sticky mud, which trapped the plane."



**Photo:** [Minutes before seaplane is cut loose from helicopter due to safety concerns.](#) (Image: David Geers)

Realising he was in danger of sinking, Mr Geers contacted his friend who was flying an accompanying aircraft.

"Doug in the other aircraft continued flying to William Creek to raise the alarm," he said.

"We also set off our personal EPIRB (Emergency Position-Indicating Radio Beacon), had a spot tracking device, which was on, and I sent a pre-programmed message to my wife saying that we landed safely but needed assistance."

A rescue helicopter soon arrived, but hopes for a speedy rescue were dashed when the chopper itself fell victim to the harsh outback conditions.

"They landed, but as they were shutting down they had an overtemp situation," Mr Geers said.

"It was hot and they were worried also about getting stuck.

"For safety reasons, they didn't want to take back off without engineers taking a look at it.

"So they radioed for another helicopter to fly out from Moomba to rescue the five of us then."

Afternoon turned to night, during which time Mr Geers and his companions ran out of water and began to become concerned.

With no moonlight, the only illumination coming from the stars, the five castaways were effectively stranded in the middle of a hazardous inland lake (in 2010, an [ABC helicopter crashed](#) in Lake Eyre during a night flight, claiming three lives).

It was almost 10pm when the survivors were relieved to hear the sound of the approaching chopper.

"He arrived at 9:45pm," said Mr Geers.

"It was a godsend that we were able to get some fluids into us."

But the debacle was far from over.

While the passengers and crew were airlifted to safety, the attempted retrieval of the seaplane four days later almost ended in disaster.

"That's the sad part of the story," Mr Geers said.

"A helicopter flew down from Kununurra in Western Australia and the plan was to sling my plane out.

"Five nautical miles from where we were, my aircraft started to fly.... one minute it was underneath where it was supposed to be, the next minute it was out near [the] left window." David Geers, pilot

"We swung it under the helicopter, took off, and everything looked perfect, my aircraft being towed in a straight and level position underneath the helicopter.

"But, five nautical miles from where we were, my aircraft started to fly."

The aerodynamic pressure on the towed fixed-wing aircraft began to exert itself, causing the plane to "fly" of its own volition, its unpredictable yawing and rolling posing a serious danger for the pilot of the chopper.

"Howard, the pilot, said one minute it was underneath where it was supposed to be, the next minute it was out near his left window, and then it was out to his right," said Mr Geers.

"The outcome probably would have continued to get worse and would have taken his helicopter down as well, so he decided to release the cord and let my plane go free."

Mr Geers said there was a brief moment of hope as the seaplane appeared to be preparing for a perfect landing.

"My aircraft continued flying," he said.

"It was quite surprising, as there was still a chance for maybe a recovery if the plane landed reasonably OK.

"But it only flew for a while, before dipping its left hand wing and doing a spiral back into the lake surface."

While Mr Geers is relieved that nobody was injured in the entire affair, he is devastated at the loss of his beloved Searey seaplane, which will now remain as a monument to the capricious nature of flight in the Australian outback.

"Unfortunately, the aircraft really is a write-off," he said.



**Photo:** David Geer's seaplane 'SeaRey' comes to a dramatic end in Lake Eyre, South Australia. (Image: David Geers)

Extracted from: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-04-10/lake-eyre-plane-crash-resuce-fails/6380664>

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